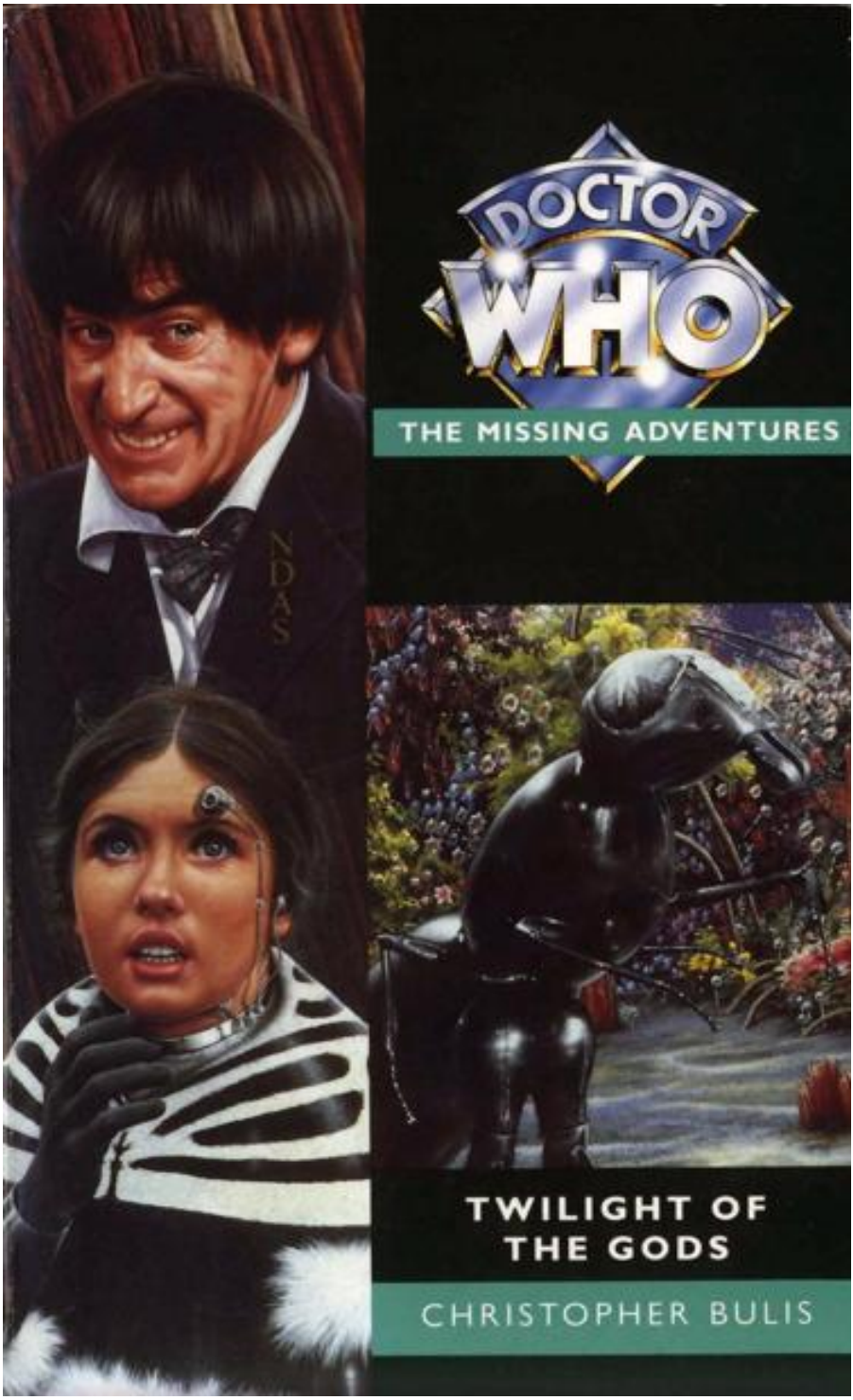
DOCTOR WHO

THE MISSING ADVENTURES

TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

CHRISTOPHER BULIS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TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL FEATURING THE SECOND DOCTOR, JAMIE AND VICTORIA.

'THEY'RE MENOPTERA,' THE DOCTOR EXCLAIMED, 'AND THIS MUST BE VORTIS! BUT WHY ARE YOU TREATING THEM LIKE THIS? THEY'RE A PEACEFUL PEOPLE, NOT SLAVES! WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING HERE?'

Many years have passed since the Doctor's first visit to the Web Planet, and he finds a very different world from the one he knew; a world now embroiled in a bitter interplanetary war between the opposing factions of a divided race.

To restore peace, the Doctor must first resolve a deadly ideological conflict, solve the paradox of the nature of life on Vortis, and finally confront the Gods of Light themselves.

As the stakes are raised, can the Doctor contain the ancient terror that threatens to devastate an entire star system?

This adventure takes place between the television stories **THE WEB OF FEAR** and **FURY FROM THE DEEP**.

CHRISTOPHER BULIS has written four previous **DOCTOR WHO** books, including the highly acclaimed **THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE.**

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TWILIGHT OF

THE GODS

Christopher Bulis

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Prologue

he lonely world, with its small host of attendant moons, Tcontinued on its long journey through the depths of space.

It was a sunless place illuminated only by starlight, but it was neither cold nor dead; though death had come close to claiming it in recent times. But the menace had been defeated and now life in all its variety re-emerged to spread unopposed over its surface, bringing colour once more to the rugged land.

Time was hard to measure here. Without a parent sun there could be no seasons or years, and charting the motions of its many moons was a complex affair. The planet's rotation about its own axis, however, did provide a form of day, marked by the rising of the great nebulous mass of dust and brilliant stars that was the centre of the cluster about which the free world drifted. By this measure some seventy thousand days passed after the great crisis had been averted.

Then, gradually, one star began to shine brighter than the rest in the wandering world's skies. For the first time in many millennia, as time might be measured elsewhere, it was approaching another planetary system bearing intelligent life. And in due course the inhabitants of the new system detected its presence. Driven both by curiosity and more complex motivations, they set out to investigate the intruder.

So it was that strangers once again broke the lonely world's isolation.

1

One

ather Li Modeenus, Hand of the Church of Rhumon in Fthe new world, lived by certainties. His belief in Omnimon, the Creator, the One Light, was absolute.

Anything less would be like questioning the existence of gravity. He was equally assured of his present objectives, which were to see that those in his care did not deviate from the high principles of Omnimonism, and to spread its teachings to the natives and so convert them to the one truth. His current lack of progress towards his second goal might have depressed a lesser man. But Omnimon was with him always and would provide him with whatever strength was necessary to complete his allotted task. Any delay was merely a test of his belief. Since that would never waver, ultimate success was certain. To Modeenus, doubt was a problem that afflicted other people.

So it was that he directed the *Royalist's* Communications Officer to relay a broadcast via the ship's main speaker system, so that it echoed through the cabins and corridors and out across the compound. He was certain it would lift the men's spirits and help steer them from the dangerous paths of doubt and introspection, down which their present isolation was leading them. Despite being intended primarily for the inner system worlds and having travelled almost four light hours through space, the transmission was unusually clear with hardly a trace of cosmic interference.

To Modeenus this was simply a minor manifestation of divine providence, and further proof that Omnimon wished all to share in the news.

2

This is Imperial City, Rhumos Prime, with the morning bulletin on Landay, Fourteenth of Druna, Twenty sixth Year of the reign of his Gracious Majesty Mommorren-cious the Third, Imperium Year 2306.

The Imperial Palace has announced today that his Majesty has sent a personal message of congratulations and encouragement to Lord Kai Shallvar of House Hokossion, presently on a mission in the most distant, and newest, outpost of the Imperium.

As reported over a year ago, our astronomers detected a new planet entering our system from deep space, and an expedition was despatched to investigate. A simple society of alien beings was discovered on its surface and peaceful contact established. With their full agreement and understanding the Imperial banner was raised and their planet, now named

Mallaveria after his Majesty's eldest daughter, was made part of the Imperium. The wisdom of this move was amply justified when a Republican spacecraft landed some time later, claiming the planet as their own, and attempted to spread dissent amongst the natives. These moves were of course stoutly resisted by the Imperial troops, who repulsed the Republican forces, succeeding in severely damaging their spacecraft. Nobly, Lord Shallvar volunteered to remain on the new world and oversee the social and spiritual integration of its inhabitants into the great family of nations that is the Imperium . . .

There was a sharp crack as a single energy bolt etched a searing path through the air of the flower forest, leaving a flickering purple afterimage in its wake. The predator trantis's head, severed cleanly at the junction with its thorax, rolled to the forest floor. The trantis's body, still frozen in its stalking posture, twitched once or twice, then dropped from the branches in a tangle of wickedly barbed claws and many-jointed legs.

'A fine shot, my Lord,' complimented Cansonn, viewing the remains through electronic binoculars from the shadows on the other side of the clearing.

Lord Kai Shallvar smiled in satisfaction, and handed the 3

energy rifle with the scribed silver inlaid stock back to his bearer. Cansonn carefully replaced the weapon in its long holster, then leant over the side of the hunting box.

'You fellows. Bring kill, quick, quick!' he commanded.

The four natives slipped away after the fallen trantis, moving with their customary light, skipping steps. Their grace belied their feelings, Cansonn knew. Their peculiar faces never showed proper emotions, but he could sense resentment even among the most docile. Primitives!

Couldn't they see it was all for the best? The Imperium looked after its subjects well if they gave their loyalty and service in return. Well, they would learn in time.

The commander of the squad of three Rhumon guards who accompanied them cleared his throat politely, even as his men continued their anxious watch on the surrounding forest.

'Will that be all for the day, Lord Captain?' he enquired hopefully. 'Only it *is* getting late.'

Cansonn looked down at the man in despair. Didn't he understand that his master was deliberately taking his time over the hunt for the sake of the men's morale? There had been stories going round of late about things seen in the forest, and he was laying them to rest by pointedly indulging in a leisurely hunt with the minimum of escorts.

Shallvar's benign expression never altered.

'Are you or your men tired, Squadleader?'

'No, Lord Captain. But Lieutenant Stroon instructed me before we left that it might be best —'

'The lieutenant's concern for my person is admirable, Squadleader, but I think we have time for one more stalk,'

he continued easily. 'The day is really very pleasant and it's quite relaxing to get away from the ship once in a while, don't you agree?'

The squadleader clearly did not, but nodded anyway. The natives returned with the remains of the trantis and packed it into the nets slung from the drith's harness. Just then the communicator in the box beeped softly, and Cansonn took the message.

4

'A vidigram from her Ladyship has just been received, my Lord,' he announced. 'And also, Father Modeenus wishes to speak with you on a matter of some importance.'

Shallvar sighed. 'Very well, Cansonn. It seems Lieutenant Stroon and the squadleader here will have their way after all. Turnabout.'

The driver sitting forward of the box behind the ears of the mechanical drith touched the controls. With a soft whirr and a slight swaying motion, the metallic-blue robot hunting lizard turned and waddled back the way it had come, with the guards and the native bearers trotting by its side. They soon vanished amid the hanging blooms of the flower forest and the clearing was still once more.

The regular beat of Workers' March number eighteen faded from the loudspeakers and the clipped tones of Morale and Discipline Officer Nevon-two came on air.

'Attention all crewpersons. This announcement has just been received from homeworld.' There was a slight click and hiss as a recording was

played back.

Republic City Number One, New Rhumos: Hour Five News, *Day two hundred and eighty-seven of Revolution Year one five three, Rhumon People's Republic standard time. Further details on the liberation of Rhumos Twelve have been released from the Ministry of Information. The continuing callous attempt by the Imperial forces of the oppressive and corrupt Emperor of Rhumos Prime to enslave the inhabitants of this wandering world have been completely halted by the efforts of our valiant fighting men and women. Have no fear for the safety of our brave compeers, fellow workers. One steadfast people's warrior is worth ten of the poor, brainwashed Imperial lackeys. With the happy cooperation of the native inhabitants of Planet Twelve, grateful for our bringing the light of collective endeavour to their world and lifting the threat of the crushing yoke of slavery from their shoulders, our glorious forces will soon triumph and push the enemy back into space. Assuming, of course, that their inferior craft will still* 5

bear them after its ill-judged attack on one of our finest battleships . . .

Captain-Commander Draga-three listened with mounting dismay to the words as they echoed out of the compound's speaker tower. She had been inspecting reinforcements to the stockade wall when the message began, which was unfortunately too public a place to call up the control room on her wristband communicator and have the playback stopped. As she was not going to make an undignified dash to the ship in person, she had to let it run its course. Some of the Imperial prisoners jeered at the words and received warning tingler shots from the guards' lectrorifles to quieten them. The native labourers continued impassively with their work.

Finally the recording ended and the march blared out again.

Draga's expression did not change, but underneath she seethed with annoyance. What did Nevon think she was up to? The woman had no sense of subtlety or finesse. The crew wanted to learn that a relief flight was on its way, or at least to be allowed more personal calls and vidis from families back home — simple, uncomplicated things, not more propaganda. Unfortunately, both the Ministry of Information and the Morale and Political Office had an ambivalent attitude towards the simple things, she reflected.

Such as inconvenient or unpalatable reality. But, then, was she any

better? She had let the crew think a ship would be on its way anytime now for months. In fact her requests for relief or reinforcements from New Rhumos or an outpost world had been ignored. As soon as it became clear that Planet Twelve had nothing to offer the Republic, her function there had become purely symbolic, and she knew it. They exactly negated the Imperial presence here, so allowing the release of an occasional uplifting news report.

Otherwise they were a note shuffled to the bottom of the file screen on some functionary's terminal.

6

She looked regretfully up at the hulk of the *Liberation Day,* her crippled battleship, which dominated the centre of the compound. Did Shallvar have the same frustrating problems with his own, no doubt thoroughly decadent and incompetent, superiors, she wondered? Probably, she decided, taking unashamedly malicious comfort from the thought. After all, the Royals were in just the same pre-dicament as she was in every other way.

Father Modeenus was waiting in the shadow of the scarred and slightly listing hull of the ***Royalist*** when the hunting party returned through the gates. By the time Shallvar had dismounted from the drith, the priest's distinctive yellow robe and staff of office were by his side.

Modeenus's unkempt bristling beard was trembling with displeasure. Always a bad sign, Shallvar knew. 'Lord Captain, I must protest —'

'Must you, Father? It has been such a peaceful day until now. Look at the game bag I've brought back. What a trophy that head will make.'

Modeenus refused to be distracted and continued relentlessly.

'I had the morning news bulletin from home relayed over the speakers as usual to cheer the men. But, I regret to say, once it was over there were irreverent and disparaging remarks bandied about, though nobody will admit them to my face.'

Shallvar frowned. 'The bulletin mentioned the Emperor's message, did it?'

'Certainly, and in glowing terms. And our work here. But the men's response was really intolerable . . . and quite incomprehensible.'

Shallvar looked into the churchman's earnest, baffled, annoyed face. No, the man did not understand at all.

'A little laxity may be permissible in the circumstances, Father,' he suggested gently. 'We are operating in difficult conditions far from home, and these news items intended for mass consumption do sometimes make . . .

simplifications. The men here on the spot, as it were, see a slightly different picture and, unthinkingly, express themselves . . . freely on the matter.'

Modeenus's eyes flashed. 'The clear implication was that the Emperor was either grossly misinformed or party to a deception, Lord Captain. And that sort of talk cannot be tolerated. The Emperor's word must not be doubted. He is the chosen vessel and tool of the Creator spirit. His word is the truth, absolute and undeniable. Anything less would be utterly inconceivable. Do you doubt that?'

Shallvar sighed and bowed his head slightly.

'No, Father.'

'So you will speak to the men sternly on the matter? I will touch upon it in my next sermon, of course, but it is essential that church and state are seen to be at one on this point.'

'Certainly, Father,' Shallvar conceded reluctantly. 'Now, if you would excuse me, I understand a vidigram from my wife has just arrived and naturally I am anxious to view it.'

Modeenus's annoyance vanished and his face lit up in a benevolent smile.

'Ah, it is good that your wife shows proper concern for your wellbeing and contacts you so often, Lord Captain.

May I ask how Lady Kai is keeping?'

'Oh, fine, fine,' Shallvar said lightly.

'Her messages must be a great comfort and support to you.'

'They are indeed. Father.'

The screen showed Arleene's attractive features inelegantly contorted. Her delicately marked medial crest, which had so caught his eye the first time he had seen her, was raised and flushed in frustrated anger — once again.

'Really, Kai. This is the first time your name has been mentioned in court circles for simply ages, and all Lenorrta could say was, "Oh, so that's where he's been all this time. I thought he'd been off inspecting training camps in the north." I could have slapped her . ..'

8

Shallvar, now robed and reclining on a couch with a goblet in his hand, smiled wryly at his wife's displeasure.

Couldn't she see it was a waste of time taking any notice of what people like Lenorrta said about anything? But then Lenorrta was of House Correllos, which had marginally more lineage among the Companion Houses than did House Hokossion, and to Arleene that mattered exceedingly.

'Why can't you make something of your position?'

Arleene's recorded image continued irritably. 'I'm sure, if the suggestion was made to the right people, that the Emperor would appoint you governor. That would be wonderful. . .'

No, my dear, you will not enjoy the privileges of a governor's wife and become the hub of a new court out here.

Appointing me a governor would mean officially increasing my status and supplying me with extra personnel and resources. And for reasons which you know full well, Arleene, the Emperor will not contemplate such an advancement for me.

'. . . or can't you just come home? Let somebody else be stuck out there . . .'

And open myself to the charge of inadequacy? No, Arleene, thought Shallvar, that's not going to happen either.

Tarnished it may be, but I still have some sense of duty.

'. . . I'm bored . . . and lonely . ..'

Ah. The truth at last. And I'm even beginning to miss you, my dear, for

all your infuriating ways. Perhaps if you didn't surround yourself with quite so many shallow, vacuous friends it would be different. Or, better still, we should have started a family when I last suggested. But you talked me out of it once again.

The recorded message came to an end with Arleene's usual rather hasty pledge of her love and wishes for his safe return. Why did she seem so cold and distant on the vidi?

Where was the vivacious, lively woman he had married?

Perhaps she was a person of the present only, whose attractions were diminished unfairly by the separation of time and space. Yet he knew some people who came over as 9

warmly and intimately on the vidi as they did in person.

Shallvar recorded one of his routine, pacifying responses, trying to appear cheerful and inject as much encouragement as he could into it. Once it was done, he encrypted it in his private House cipher and keyed it through to the communications room for transmission. Then he sat before the blank terminal screen for some minutes in silence.

Cansonn entered and methodically began placing freshly cleaned clothes in his wardrobe cubical.

'Do you understand women, Cansonn?' Shallvar asked suddenly.

Cansonn allowed himself the slightest of polite coughs.

'I recall, more years ago than I care to count, your father asking me the same question, my Lord. That was on the night before his wedding.'

'Oh, and what was your answer?'

'Inferring that the question was not a general enquiry, but in fact about his bride to be and was suggestive of some uncertainty on his part about the impending alliance, I said it was not my place to say, my Lord.'

'Well, my father had no cause for complaint afterwards, did he?'

'No, my Lord. Your father had a most happy marriage, if I might be permitted the observation.'

'You probably knew him better than I did, Cansonn, so I think you are

permitted.'

'Thank you, my Lord.'

Shallvar paused, then asked, 'What would Father have thought of Arleene, do you think?'

'That is not my place to say either, my Lord,' Cansonn said with a trace of stiffness.

'No, it isn't, I suppose. And it isn't fair of me to ask.

Sorry, Cansonn.'

'Not at all, my Lord.'

Shallvar mused for a moment, then asked, 'Are you happy with your situation, Cansonn?'

'Certainly, my Lord. I have had the honour of serving the House of Hokossion since I was a lad, and never regretted a 10

moment of it. I was privileged to know your grandfather, and serve your father, and now your own person, my Lord.

There is a great sense of assurance in having a place in such a succession, however humble that place might be.'

'Yes, we must all know our place,' agreed Shallvar. And, for the foreseeable future, his was here. 'Fetch me another drink, Cansonn,' he added gloomily.

'Certainly, my Lord.'

11

Two

wel had successfully evaded them between tutorials for Tsome time now, but Bris and Ilex's persistence was finally rewarded when they tracked their fellow student down to a dark billowing cloud cave. Carefully insinuating themselves past the cold matter, they quickly flanked Twel to make escape impossible. To ensure that the depth of their annoyance was fully appreciated they used adult speech mode with proper simultaneous qualifying inflections. They were not communicating through sound waves, but a translation might have run as follows: (Accusation): 'Twel synthesis endangered Ilex/self

project,' Bris began angrily, and Ilex displayed full agreement with the charge. Twel realized there was no point in denial and replied in like manner:

(Refutation): 'Consider elapsed time between synthesis inception and realization synthesis not indigenous. Delay proves synthesis viable creation.' (Compromise suggestion):

'Regard as test of project configuration stability.' (Proposed alternate response): 'Ilex/Bris should express gratitude to self' (rhetorical). 'Project continues' (query). Bris was not being sidetracked.

'Project continues despite Twel interference.' (Disbelief/

contempt): 'Twel proposed alternate response and compromise suggestion rejected.' (Information): 'Project stability restored, despite widespread disruption.'

'Subject losses not total' (query), Twel asked.

'Confirmed not total.' (Query): 'Explain enquiry.'

(Self-intent statement/challenge): 'Improve synthesis design for future use.'

Ilex interjected. (Suspicion): 'Twel incapable synthesis 12

creation as stated.' (Accusation): 'Synthesis design procured/

stolen.' (Self-intent/threat): 'Identify and reveal to Tutor Oryl true source of synthesis.'

'Negative.' (Repeat assertion): 'Self created synthesis.'

(Counter observation/threat): 'Ilex/Bris project lacks student monitor approval.' (Consequence): 'Synthesis origin enquiry inadvisable.'

(Statement): 'Ilex/self project demonstrates exceptional ingenuity,' Bris countered, annoyed at being put back on the defensive. (Expectation): 'Oryl grants retroactive permission following demonstration.'

'Probability accepted,' allowed Twel. (Conjunctive hypothetical proposition): 'Consider consequences of Bris/

Ilex project exposure before demonstration.'

'Demand confirmation Twel intent' (query),' flex flared back.

'Possibility only,' admitted Twel. (Conjunctive proposition): 'Twel/Bris/Ilex combination project' (query).

'Negative.' (Emphasized statement): 'Bris/Ilex project only.'

'Acknowledged,' Twel said, then added ominously, (speculation/probability/threat): 'Oryl learns of Bris/Ilex project.'

(Information): 'Project entrance access recoded, location changed.' Ilex countered boldly. (Expectation): 'Project completed satisfactorily before tutorial cycle ends.' (Warning): 'Self/Bris will deny all knowledge in any future Twel-inspired Oryl enquiry.' (Consequence): 'No proof project existence.' (Speculation): 'Oryl conjectures Twel exhibiting baseless malicious intent.'

(Observation): 'Again,' added Bris meaningfully.

Ilex flashed suddenly. (Urgent observation): 'Class commencement imminent.'

They could tell the remark about troublemaking had struck home because they could feel it. Twel was careless about radiating on the emotional range at times. But all their rival and failed saboteur said as they made their way back to the tuitional zone was, (statement/warning): 'Twel capability underestimation inadvisable.'

13

Three

Victoria Waterfield walked along the racks of garments in the TARDIS's wardrobe room. The rows seemed to go on forever, stretching away into the darkness that retreated before her as concealed lights automatically illuminated her way.

It was like passing through the store chamber for some vast historical pageant. All the ages of humanity were apparently represented somewhere in the collection, with costumes from around the world. And perhaps even beyond.

She suspected that some of the stranger items on the more distant racks were not from Earth at all.

There were furs that a primitive caveman might have worn and capes of roughly woven cloth. Close by these were coloured wraps and skirts of finer material, which she thought might be Egyptian. Next to them

were a dozen pairs of differently wrought sandals, gowns, hats and feathered headdresses. These were succeeded by Roman togas and a glittering array of medieval suits of mail and armour. Tudor gable coifs and coronets, full-length gowns, doublets and hose, followed by Elizabethan Spanish capes and padded breeches. A dashing cavalier's high-waisted suit jostled with Puritan black, a French Revolutionary tricolour sash and Restoration garments trimmed with ribbons and lace. An array of blank-faced mannequin heads bore a collection of wigs: full-bottomed, powdered and curled; while another row displayed hats: beaver, tricorn, bowler, top hats, ladies'

bonnets and more. She came to the costumes of Victorian England and her own time: men's frock coats, ladies'

crinoline and bustles, which were just becoming popular 14

again when she left. She lingered there awhile, amid familiar things. But then, as always, wandered on into the strange fashions of her personal future. Dress lines slimmed, hats became suddenly flamboyant, sprouting colourful feathers and ribbons, while men's suits became more sober.

Then there was a flurry of utilitarian dress and uniforms.

Skirts rose and lines slimmed even further. Clothes became lighter and more frivolous, it seemed. There were more uniforms, and hemlines rose again. Brighter colours and complicated print patterns flourished. She passed racks of high boots and strangely cut men's trousers. Materials were lighter and felt oddly silky and elastic to the touch. It was hard to tell what clothes were meant for men and what for women any more. Glittering metallic fabrics appeared and one-piece garments combining top and trousers. Then it seemed that medieval armour had been reinvented as she came to strange, heavy, all-encompassing costumes with glass-fronted helmets. But, as she had learnt from Jamie, they were only 'space suits', designed to protect the wearer from the cold and vacuum beyond the Earth's atmosphere.

He had actually worn one himself, he had recounted modesty, when the TARDIS had travelled into the future to the surface of the moon and he'd first encountered the Cybermen. Victoria shuddered involuntarily as the association reminded her of her own meeting with those silver monsters.

But perhaps the strangest thing about the wonderful array, Victoria always thought, was that its owner hardly ever used any of it. It

seemed the Doctor never took much notice of fashion at all, eccentrically preferring his shabby black frock coat with the frayed cuffs to any style history could offer him.

Victoria stopped by what she called a mirror island.

There were several dotted among the marching ranks of costumes. They had curtained changing cubicles with adjustable full-length mirrors, dressing tables with three-part mirrors, and plain tables with hand mirrors. There were 15

even special mirrors that allowed you to see yourself the right way round, and even your own back. She still found those a little disconcerting to use, because it was as though another person was standing there. It was here, in private, that she occasionally experimented with new clothes. Some of the styles from her future were quite outlandish and indecently revealing, and she would never have dared wear such things only a few months before. But travelling through time and space had caused her to reconsider what was acceptable in fashion terms. Her present costume dated from a hundred years after her own period and had a skirt so short it actually showed her knees. And, after some initial trepidation, she had found it pleasantly light and unrestricting and determined she would never return to her old heavy floor-length hooped skirt again. Mercy me, she thought, I'm becoming quite self-willed. Whatever would Father have thought?

And for a moment she was a child again.

It was Christmas. They had been to church that morning, bundled up against the cold. The taste of plum pudding was still in her mouth. There was snow outside and darkness drawing in, but fires roared in all the grates and the house was warm and cosy. The trunk of old clothes and hats had been brought down from the attics, and she and her young cousins, who had come to stay over the festive season, acted out charades and snatches from plays before their tolerant parents. Her mother had still been alive then, of course. She had been beautiful, she recalled. She saw her father's face, without the lines of worry that came later. He had laughed a lot more then, it seemed. That was before they had fallen under Maxtible's power, and become in turn tools of those terrible Dalek creatures.

Victoria shook herself out of the bittersweet reverie.

She was beginning to realize how constrained her old life had been,

even when she had been innocently happy. Yet how she missed her father and wished he could have journeyed with her and shared the wonders she had experienced . . . She sighed. But he was dead and the Doctor and Jamie had substituted for the family she had lost. And 16

then, with a slight shiver, she knew there would inevitably come a time when she would also have to leave them to make a new life for herself - one as different from that she had known, perhaps, as these multitudinous clothes were one from another.

But would she ever have the courage to make such a decision?

A peculiar but now familiar sound began to make itself heard. It was a deep, distant breathless groaning, rising and falling, slowly growing in volume and seeming to come from all around her, even vibrating up through the floor.

Quickly she ran back down the aisle of clothes, setting some of them swaying as she brushed past, and out into the corridor.

The space-time ship TARDIS was about to land.

The increasing tempo of materialization mingled with the ever-present hum of complex electronic equipment as Victoria entered the control room. She blinked in its diffuse white light, which seemed almost harsh after the shadowy wardrobe chamber.

The Doctor was fussing round the central hexagonal console, pressing buttons, twisting dials and muttering.

Lights and meter needles flickered back at him as the glass piston of the time rotor rose and fell more heavily. At these moments Victoria felt there was a tremendous pressure building up about the TARDIS, which would force them out of the strange plane they had been travelling through and back into reality again, like an orange pip squirting from between her fingers. If she understood even a fraction of the Doctor's explanation of how it functioned, that was not so far from the truth.

'Dear me,' exclaimed the Doctor suddenly, 'that's not right at all. . .'

Standing a few paces back from the console, Jamie McCrimmon watched on intently, a frown marking his clear, homely features. As always he looked very sturdy and dependable, dressed in his plain-weave shirt, kilt and high woollen socks with a dirk tucked into the top, which was the 17

costume of his own original time and place over hundred years before her. She stepped quietly to his side.

'Is there something wrong?' she asked.

'Nothing to fret about,' Jamie replied in his soft Scottish burr. 'The Doctor says there's some interference out there that's making the landing a wee bit difficult, that's all.'

'Is it . . . dangerous?' She had spoken quietly but the Doctor heard and glanced up.

'Oh no, it's not dangerous, Victoria,' he said brightly, then added with disconcerting contriteness as he returned his attention to the controls, 'Well... at least, I don't think so.' He prodded some more buttons and tapped a dial, managing to look wise and perplexed at the same time. 'But it would probably be as well if you both held onto something. The landing might not be quite as smooth as usual.'

The rhythmic pulse of materialization deepened suddenly.

Jamie and Victoria clasped the edge of the console. Some of the roundels that dimpled the walls of the room in regular rows lit up, flickering in an erratic pattern. The TARDIS

swayed slightly, sending the incongruous bentwood hatstand near the door toppling.

Then there was a dull booming impact that knocked them off their feet.

Four

Geotech Vo Annolos glanced about anxiously as the automatic analyser beeped and whirred its way through testing another rock sample, and wished it functioned more quietly. After all, he was in a combat zone. At least, he was in the supposedly demilitarized buffer strip separating Imperial and Republican territories, the borders of which both sides vigorously disputed and knowingly infringed while trading timeworn protestations. If a Rep patrol came across them there would inevitably be a stunbeam fight, and with variable-intensity weapons there could always be

'regrettable accidents'.

Fortunately, the jungle-choked canyon remained peaceful, and only the chittering and clicking of the native fauna broke the silence. A translucent bubble bird drifted between the trees, snagging a branch with a trailing tendril, and drew itself slowly down to perch. A small and quite harmless crawler rippled innocently through the undergrowth searching for the particular ground fungus it fed on.

Mallaveria could be quite pleasant at times, Annolos conceded grudgingly. Down the canyon he could see Biotech Tu Laartak taking samples of vegetation. Laartak really had fallen for the place, and his only regret, often expressed, was that this was not a properly equipped scientific expedition, a view for which Annolos had some sympathy. But all that the rest of the crew wanted to know was what they could safely eat to supplement their dwindling regular rations. So far that was precious little, which was one reason for their present mission. The expedition's other purpose, and the reason for Annolos's presence, was the quest for

metal-bearing ores for repairs to the ship. Unfortunately metal was one thing the planet seemed deficient in.

He saw an indistinct figure in a variable-refraction combat suit appear out of the shadows at Laartak's side and draw him into the thicker cover again. They had to be cautious in case the Reps still had a functioning aircar. Their own armoured halftrack was almost totally concealed by an overhanging multicoloured clump of feather ferns. This far from base it was preferable that not even the natives should see them. Not that their malcontents were likely to attack a well-armed party, he consoled himself, but there had been rumours of strange things in the deeper forest —

'How much longer, Annolos?' a quiet voice said in his ear.

It was Garrond. Annolos silently cursed the efficacy of modern camouflage suits as he recovered himself.

'I am proceeding as fast as I can, Squadleader,' he replied stiffly.

'You'd better be,' Garrond growled. 'We don't want to spend all day minding a pair of tech slackers. And next time keep a sharper watch on your back.' And he faded into the bush again.

Annolos glowered. Garrond was a solus, without any acknowledged family lineage, but he was Annolos's superior in military rank, and

seemed to enjoy exercising the authority over one of full clan lineage.

Determined not to be surprised again, Annolos took a closer look around him. Most of the squad were well concealed, but gradually he located them by a slight flicker in the undergrowth or ripple of shadow as someone eased a stiff leg or turned a head. Beside a boulder only a stone's throw away, he noted a larger distortion which resolved into two crouching squadmen. Even as he watched, he saw one man remain motionless in the shadow of a rock, while the other began making his way quietly towards him. Perhaps they were passing a message round orally so as not to break communicator silence. The man got closer. Something about the way he moved

struck Annolos as odd. It was stealthy, even graceful, despite the bulky suit. If he didn't know better he'd swear that. . .

He froze in stark disbelief as realization slowly dawned, then jerked his wristband communicator up to his dry hips.

'Reps! Ambush!'

Even as he shouted the warning and the female Rep soldier swung her lectrorifle up to point at him, the shrill buzz of gunfire broke forth and the air was suddenly criss-crossed by tracer beams lancing out from the surrounding forest. He fell sideways, snatching at his pistol as he went, hit the ground, rolled into a crouch and snapped off one wild reflex shot. By sheer chance it struck the Rep in her side on the joint between her suit's chest and hip panels. She doubled up, dropping to her knees, then pitched forward onto her face.

For a moment Annolos watched her stupidly, wondering why she didn't get up. A wisp of smoke rose from the charred hole in her suit. His pistol had been on full intensity, not stun.

A regrettable accident. . .

A heavy beam blasted a hole in the ground by his feet, and the sting of rock fragments against his cheek brought him back to reality. Instinct took over and sent him scrabbling ungainly away on hands and knees, crashing through the underbrush and into the shadows as the sound of battle echoed from the canyon walls. He'd never been under fire before. The space battle with the Republican ship had been on another scale — a shared threat to the whole company and over so quickly there had hardly been time for fear. This was different. Face to face

with the enemy.

Personal. Bloody. Frightening.

He'd killed her.

He was not running away, he kept telling himself, even as he pressed back further through the trees, flinching from the tracer beams that stabbed through the foliage after him. He was no coward. He was a clansman. He was. . . was . . .

trying to find shelter so that he could 21

return fire. Yes, that was it. His frantic gaze fell upon a dark cleft, part overgrown in the rocky ground, nestling up against the base of the cliff. He took two long strides towards it, felt his right ankle turn suddenly as a shard of rock slipped from under his boot, and tumbled headlong into the cleft. It was only chest deep, but that was enough.

Annolos felt a sickening impact, then everything went black.

'Now, young Vo Annolos,' said Grand Uncle Harrlon sternly, 'Clan Marrakat doesn't support deadwood, you know. Hard work and sound speculation, that's our motto.

What are you going to do with your life that will turn a profit, eh?'

Annolos could hear him clearly, which was odd because Harrlon was dead.

But Annolos was a gangling youth, standing awkwardly in front of Harrlon just as he had years before, desperately trying to think of a good answer.

'I do like . . . geology, Grand Uncle,' he had spluttered out at last. 'There was a school field trip last summer to Scaarn Land, and we visited the Fodal Caves. It was very interesting. My report was the best in the class.' It was not much, he knew. Hardly the obvious gateway to a career in reputable commerce or a bespoke trade, but Harrlon had looked thoughtful and then smiled.

And Annolos had studied applied geology accordingly and had gone on to university where he eventually graduated respectably. And sure enough, a job was waiting for him with a planetary survey company in which Clan Marrakat held a small interest. It promised offworld travel and a chance to work himself up, in time, to a position of

responsibility appropriate to his station in life. An agreed portion of his salary was covenanted to the Clan Marrakat coffers, as was traditional, and all seemed set fair.

Then the 'Discord' flared up again.

The Republicans incited the uprising on Theron Five, a 22

gas-giant moon colony in the outer system. It was eventually suppressed, but there were further incidents. The fragile, distrustful truce between Republic and Imperium was broken. Reports of outrages and reprisals filled the news screens. The grey war was polarizing once more.

Service recruitment was stepped up. Clan Marrakat moved a portion of its funds into armaments and prepared to do its patriotic duty as it always had.

Then recruitment began to tail off, and national service was reintroduced.

For the sake of clan honour, when it became obvious they couldn't exert enough influence to prevent it, Annolos volunteered for a post in a military technical support unit.

At least he made some use of his specialist knowledge. He performed the work required of him adequately, but basic training confirmed that he simply was not of soldier stock, unlike the sons of noble houses destined for command rank from birth, or one of the other ranks from a mere line family, or even no family at all like Garrond. Clansmen were merchants and professionals by tradition and breeding.

They provided the commercial heart of the Imperium, not its warriors.

Besides, he'd never have imagined that the military would find a use for a geologist.

Had that been in the back of his mind all along?

No, I'm not a coward.

I believe you, Vo.

Thank you, Grand Uncle.

Remember, my boy: work hard and speculate sensibly.

Uncle ... I thought you were dead? I am, my boy, just like her. Who?

The Rep soldier.

It was an accident, really . . .

Where was he?

As the stench of burnt flesh and scorched metal revived him, the confusion of old memories dissolved to wherever such things went.

23

Slowly, he became aware that he was lying in an awkward, twisted heap in the bottom of the rock cleft. He moved slightly and winced with pain. He felt sick and dizzy, and his head and neck ached dully. As he shifted his left arm, a hot wire seemed to burn in his wrist. Was it broken? He tried to sit up to examine it further, and was rewarded by a fresh spasm in his right ankle. He remembered the treacherous rock and his clumsy fall. . .

The ambush!

He began a frantic, one-handed hunt for his pistol in the rubble at the bottom of the cleft. Eventually he found the weapon and grasped it hard for reassurance, even as the realization sank in that there was no longer any sound of fighting. He looked at his watch and sagged a little in relief and dismay. Almost a standard hour had passed since the attack. It must all be over. But who had won?

He struggled upright and peered over the rim of the cleft.

Everything was very still and peaceful once again but he knew now how deceptive that could be. Alert for the slightest sign of danger, he crawled slowly forward through the brush until he could peer out into the clearing. There was blood on the sandy soil and the scorched pockmarks of gunfire. Three combat-suited bodies lay on the ground and a haze of smoke lingered in the air. The feather fern bush was a smoking stump and blackened streaks outlined the shattered windows of the halftrack. Otherwise all was still.

Cautiously, he limped over to the bodies, darting glances at the surrounding jungle. The first was that of a Republican soldier. Male, not the one he'd shot, for which he was oddly grateful. Maybe she wasn't dead after all. For all that she represented, he found himself hoping that was so. The second was wearing Imperial insignia, but the

face was too badly damaged for him to be sure of who he was, and Annolos looked away quickly. The last body was that of Squadleader Garrond.

How ironic, Annolos thought bitterly. Admonishing him to keep watch while the Reps, some of them women even, had stolen up on them. Strangely, he felt more 24

angry at Garrond than at the enemy. How would his family, if he had any, bear the dishonour if he was deemed to have been negligent? Perhaps people of that class would not appreciate it, and maybe that was a blessing. Still, all trace of social difference was gone now, and at least he'd died fighting.

Annolos suddenly felt sick again and hobbled back to cover, where he leant against a tree, recovering his strength.

He took a mouthful of water from his canteen and chewed an energy pill. Dully, he wondered what had happened to the rest of the squad and their attackers. Should he search for more bodies in case someone was still alive, or had the survivors, of either side, already taken care of them before they left? Of course, they must have done, he reasoned. And they had missed finding him at the bottom of his treacherous hiding place. Obviously they had withdrawn quickly to have left their dead behind.

Annolos tapped his wristband communicator, calling up the emergency channel. Nothing happened. He twisted his aching arm around curiously and saw a deep dent in the ferroplastic case. Well, he couldn't contact base with a broken communicator, and the one in the halftrack was obviously destroyed. It would be a grisly business, but he would have to take a wristband from Garrond or the other squadman.

Feeling a little better, if still weak, he steeled himself and marched back out towards Garrond's body.

It was gone.

Utter disbelief and numbing shock froze him to the spot.

His surroundings grew hazy and he came within a fraction of fainting clean away. The body had been out of his sight for only a few moments while he'd rested against the tree.

Surely Garrond had been dead. Corpses do not get up and walk.

Which meant. . .

Suddenly the skin on the back of his neck crawled. He knew he was being watched.

He drew his pistol again and spun round. Had there been a flicker of motion between the trees? He snapped 25

off a shot, but the bolt flared away innocently into the shadows. Was it just some harmless native lifeform, or the natives themselves? They might have wanted Garrond's weapons, but why take his body as well? Could it have been one of the local predators or Rep reinforcements? But surely the Reps would have shot him by now, or have taken him prisoner. He recalled the rumours of things half seen in the alien forest. Stories that he had ridiculed so confided in the comfort of the ship's rec-room. Stories of ghosts . . .

He felt helplessly exposed in the clearing, but was uncertain which way to make for cover for fear of running straight into whatever it was out there. The jungle shadows seemed thicker than ever. There was a rude and another nicer of motion half seen out of the corner of his eye. He spun around, blazing away.

'I see you!' he shouted defiantly.

More deliberate, purposeful rustles. Another shadow behind him, and he turned again. Trees and bushes flared and charred as shot after shot burned into them. But if he hit any other living thing there was no sign of it.

And suddenly the charge meter on his gun flashed red and the trigger clicked uselessly. Full-power bolts eat up charge so use stun whenever possible: elementary weapons training. With a sobbing cry he flung the weapon away and sank to his knees in utter terror, only wanting to be put out of his torment so that his clan would never know what a coward he truly was.

The bushes rustled again but he dared not raise his eyes.

Then there was the flicker of a shadow, the whisper of rushing air and a heavy blow knocked him senseless to the ground.

'Come in Squad Three . . . Come in Squad Three . . .'

The *Royalist's* communications watch officer stood behind the operator as he repeated his call. There was no response.

'How long is it now?' he asked.

'Over an hour, sir.'

'A patrol's been sent out after them, but keep listening.'

'Understood, sir.'

The officer returned to his station while the operator continued at his fruitless task. His fellow at the next console suddenly stiffened and adjusted his tuning controls. The first operator noticed this action and asked, 'Got anything?'

The other frowned. 'Yes, but it's on the wrong channel.

Enemy-frequency emergency beacon, I think. Some poor Rep's in trouble as well, I guess.'

'Good.'

'You don't suppose it's anything to do with our missing squad, do you?'

'No reason why it should be — but you'd better report it just in case.'

'Wonder what's happening out there.'

'Well at least one Rep's got problems, that's for sure.'

'I mean besides the good news.'

Fildar-five, soldier of the People's Army, knew she was dying with a certainty that would have won Modeenus's grudging approval.

She felt herself slipping away and knew also that there was only an eternity of blackness awaiting her. At least the worst of the pain had gone, or perhaps she was simply no longer aware of the pain, which was much the same thing.

And she had gone down fighting tyranny, which was all a good Republican warrior could hope for in the end. She just wished she hadn't been so clumsy, after disposing of the soldier by the rock so nearly, in letting that Imperial tech get the first shot off. She'd been close enough to see the surprise on his face when he'd recognized her. He'd seemed so ineffectual. Perhaps that was what had stayed her hand that crucial fraction. What sentimentality! There was no place

for that in war, especially with the enemy. But it was all over now.

No!

There was one more thing she had to do, if only she could remember.

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Her confused thoughts cleared briefly.

Yes: a warning.

She had to send a warning because something was very wrong. She was being carried somewhere by strangers -

beings who were neither Republicans nor Royals or natives.

Something unknown.

Aliens.

Two or three of them at least, she thought. They'd picked her up in the canyon, probably thinking she was already dead. Where she was now she had no idea. She wished she could open her eyes one last time to find out who, or what, they were. After all, what more could they do to her? But she did not need to see them to know what they were not.

Their touch was terribly wrong. Unnatural. Not the texture of ordinary flesh, or the native's semi-pliant carapace. And it was cold. Dead. She had to know! With the last of her strength she forced her eyes open and saw the blurred forms of those who carried her.

They were lies, all lies!

Dimly looming ahead was a wall of rock freckled with dark openings. It must not block her signal. Must leave some clue to follow. The veil was closing remorselessly.

Darkness beckoned. Desperately, Fildar twisted the activated communication band off her wrist and let it fall to the ground.

Then she died.

Her bearers continued on without a pause.

The wristband lay in the dust for a moment, still sending out its emergency signal. Then something resembling the heel of a boot

stamped down onto it and ground down hard, until the casing split and microcircuitry spilt out into the sand.

28

Five

or once Ja

F

mie insisted on being the first to leave the TARDIS.

Even though the scanner had shown no obvious sign of danger, the mysterious interference and the rough landing had been clear warning that some unknown force might await them outside, and he was taking no chances. Hard-won experience had taught him that the Doctor had a fine talent for setting them down in the midst of the most unexpected perils. So, as he emerged from the narrow door of the battered blue mid-twentieth-century police call box, which was the space—time ship's disconcerting external guise, his hand was ready to reach for his sock top and the razor-sharp dirk sheathed within it. But his caution appeared to be unnecessary, and, after a moment's intense scrutiny of their new surroundings, he beckoned the Doctor and Victoria to follow after him into the thin cool air of the strange forest in which the TARDIS had materialized.

Everything was lit in a diffuse, pallid light, having an oddly timeless quality about it, like that on an overcast day.

Yet the slivers of sky showing through the overhanging foliage were a deep purple, almost black, at the zenith, shading slightly to royal blue towards the horizon, crossed by a few streamers of high, silvery cloud. From out of this velvet background the diamond-bright points of at least a hundred extraordinarily brilliant stars blazed steadily.

Hanging as it seemed almost haphazardly among them were the discs of three varicoloured moons, each of a different size, and each in a slightly different and ghostly multiphase, according to the angle of the starlight it reflected.

29

'How strange, yet lovely,' said Victoria after a long, moment's contemplation of the spectacle. 'It's like night and day rolled into one. But is this place only lit by stars or is there a proper sun?'

The Doctor, whose face had crumpled into a scowl of concentration, licked a finger and held it up as though to test the nonexistent breeze. Then he sniffed curiously.

'This is almost familiar,' they heard him mumble to himself. 'Now where have I seen a sky like this before? Not with all this vegetation, I'm certain .. .'

It would have been darker in the forest but for the pale ground reflecting back the light and lifting the gloom. There was a continuous dusty layer of sandy soil, streaked in silver grey, white and yellow, forming the occasional miniature dune or shallow pit. Here and there this soft carpet was pierced by blocky outcrops of striated red and ochre rock.

The forest plants themselves were the strangest things Jamie had ever seen. The trees, if that was what they were, resembled oversized flowering plants or shrubs, and blooms of every size, shape and hue hung about them. Smooth, thick, fibrous stalks threw out spreading fans of leaves, some erupting from the ground at their base, others bursting forth in fans and trailing fronds to merge into a thick canopy layer overhead. And from this profusion, like improbable festive decorations, dangled huge blossoms. Petals spread in opening shells, pouted into trumpets or ruffled like swirling skirts, revealing delicate spikes, pods or helical filaments within.

Gradually they became aware of a constant background noise: a portmanteau of rustles, clicks, hums and buzzes, and realized that many large, oddly shaped insects were at work in the foliage, apparently going about their normal tasks of feeding and pollinating. As they observed this activity, something a foot across and glinting metallically whirred about their heads on iridescent wings, making them flinch and Victoria utter a little startled gasp. Jamie saw a huge pair of compound eyes glittering at him and reached for his dirk.

'It's all right,' the Doctor reassured him, as the creature 30

darted away among the trees once more, its curiosity apparently satisfied. 'It didn't mean any harm. It's only interested in plants, I think.'

'That's as maybe, Doctor,' Jamie countered, 'but even if that's no more than a bee hereabouts, I wouldn't want to feel its sting!'

Leaving the TARDIS, they walked a little way into the flower forest, their feet making no sound on the sandy ground. Jamie noticed faint

tracks in the soil. It was too soft and flowing to give any details, but some impressions suggested beings larger than the insects they had so far seen.

He maintained his vigilance. There was plenty of cover to provide concealment for a beast of considerable size.

Nothing dangerous manifested itself, however, and after a while the strange beauty of the forest began to distract even his alert and suspicious attention. He noticed that in addition to the range of colours familiar to earthly flowers, there were also exotic flashes of metallic sheens and translucent membranes both clear and tinted. Some of the plant leaves, which were of all shapes and sizes, were backed in a deep red, while others were a metallic silver, making natural mirrors that played with their reflections as they passed and threw them back weirdly distorted. Other tree plants threw out from their upper stalks additional thick tubular roots that arched over and burrowed into the ground like flying buttresses. In a pool of deeper shadow beneath an overgrown bower of such toots they saw many-coloured blooms of a species of creeper that glowed softly from within due to some kind of natural luminescence. The glittering forms of smaller insects buzzed about them, occasionally disappearing inside their open mouths.

'They're wonderful - like Chinese lanterns,' Victoria said delightedly. 'Doctor, do you think we could take a small one back with us and grow it in the TARDIS?'

The Doctor interlaced his fingers and raised his eyebrows.

'It would make a novel fly trap, I suppose,' he agreed.

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'A fly trap?'

'Well that certainly seems to be its function. None the insects entering seem to be emerging again, do they Still, I'm sure we can find a large enough pot somewhere Of course, there are no flies in the TARDIS, so you' have to find some substitute to feed it on.'

Victoria was looking decidedly less enthusiastic about the idea and Jamie grinned at her discomfiture. The Doctor smiled benevolently.

'You must learn not to be taken in by first impressions, Victoria,' he said gently. 'Things are not always what they seem, especially on an

alien world. Remember that.'

They wandered on. The level of the light remained constant, and Jamie found it hard to judge the passage of time. The stars in the coloured sky suggested dawn or dusk, but it grew neither noticeably brighter nor darker. Victoria rapidly recovered her spirits as they proceeded, and she began naming the strange plants after their more obvious or fanciful characteristics. Consequently they were soon surrounded by 'ribbon trees', 'glass pumpkins', 'bell bushes,'

'ostrich ferns' and half a dozen others. The Doctor, his botanical curiosity clearly stimulated, began flitting from plant to plant himself, rather like an excited bee. Jamie decided to keep a close eye on him. A canny man, the Doctor, but apt, absentmindedly, to forget his own sound advice and walk right into trouble.

'You know, I don't think it ever gets much brighter than this here,' the Doctor muttered half to himself, echoing Jamie's thoughts as he examined the transparent balloon-shaped growth Victoria had christened a glass pumpkin.

'Some of these plants are clearly highly adapted to gathering what little light there is, presumably for photosynthesis, while others without such adaptations seem to send additional roots into the ground instead.'

'Photo *whatis*?' Jamie responded blankly.

'The process by which plants use sunlight to grow and also replenish the air we breathe,' Victoria explained smartly.

'Oh, aye, that,' agreed Jamie, covering his incomprehension. Then he pricked up his ears. 'Listen . . . can you hear something?'

They became aware of a slight hissing, burbling noise reverberating through the trees. Following the sound, they soon came upon a small crater on the edge of an open glade.

It was a cone about ten feet across, and had steep, waist-high sides. Steam rose gently from it, and, as they approached, the ground underfoot grew noticeably warmer.

Peering cautiously over the rim, blinking against the upwelling of moist, almost scalding air, they found themselves looking down a dark

and apparently bottomless shaft. Condensing steam hissed and bubbled in crevices about the inner rim.

'There must be some substantial store of heat at the bottom,' mused the Doctor. 'If it's not too deep it may be this that some of the plants use as an alternative source of energy to sunlight.'

'Whoever heard of plants living off a volcano?' said Victoria disbelievingly

'There are many stranger things you have never heard of countered the Doctor. 'But this isn't an actual volcano, at least in the ordinary sense. Though the rocks we've seen so far certainly look plutonic in origin, there are no signs of recent lava flows. Perhaps it's a geyser vent. We'd better not stay here too long,' he added with almost mischievous equanimity, 'or we might find a high-pressure fountain of boiling water coming up to meet us, which would be rather uncomfortable.'

Jamie took a quick pace backwards.

'Well let's not chance it then, Doctor,' he said, his eyes lifting to follow the potential course of such an eruption.

'Hey, look. What's that?'

Intent on the crater, they had not realized that the clear swathe of open sky above the clearing reached to a distant line of mountain peaks. Hanging low over these was a glowing band of light from the middle of which shone a dazzling point far more brilliant than any other visible star.

'That must be the nearest sun to this world,' the Doctor declared, after a moment's study.

'But that's no proper sun,' said Jamie practically, holding up his palm to the brilliant pinpoint. 'There's no enough heat from it to warm the place.'

'Quite correct, Jamie,' the Doctor agreed. 'So the heat must come from elsewhere.'

'Underground,' said Victoria quickly. The Doctor's smile broadened.

'Exactly. Not only the plant life, but the whole planet must rely on internal heat to make conditions here tolerable.

There must be many more plutonic vents around here of much greater dimensions than this one.'

They continued on through the forest.

Shortly they came upon a small clear stream bubbling over a sandy bed which meandered through a hollow. They would have had to wade across, except that a simple bridge of blocks and slabs of the ruddy local rock had already been laid across it.

'Then there must be people on this world to have built this,' declared Victoria.

'People ... or something,' Jamie retorted darkly.

'Well, we'll just have to find out, won't we?' the Doctor said brightly, taking a step onto the bridge. 'Come along, it's quite safe.'

The forest on the other side of the stream climbed a gentle slope. Ahead, the ragged top of a cliff wall rose over the flower trees, which gradually began to thin out, except for a few isolated plants that rose a little higher than the rest.

These had more substantial stalks and carried a bulbous gourd perhaps fifteen feet across. There seemed to be a row of round holes in their upper curves, almost like . . .

windows? Even as Jamie tried to make out further details, they reached the edge of the forest. A strange habitation lay before them. For a moment they hesitated, but the silence and stillness remained unbroken, save for the chatter of insects in the forest behind them. Cautiously they stepped out into the open.

A cleared strip of the sandy ground ran along the foot

of the cliff. Carefully raked paths marked with loose stone borders had been laid across it in graceful loops and curves.

Between these paths were several enclosures of vertical stone posts driven into the ground, resembling livestock pens. Jamie noticed that the size and spacing of the stone posts was different in each enclosure, varying from knee height to taller than their heads, suggesting that, if they had held animals, they must have been of quite different kinds.

Along the base of the cliff was a row of dark openings, apparently the mouths of tunnels. Above rose a sheer rock face dotted with hundreds of round, porthole-like windows, between which were set larger, oval, man-sized openings.

Some were closed by blinds or matting curtains, and each had a small semicircular projecting ledge below it.

'The people of this world must be very primitive if they still live in caves,' Victoria observed, with mild disapproval.

'Not primitive in the pejorative sense, Victoria,' the Doctor said in gentle reproof, looking about with keen interest. 'Note the careful way those pathways are laid out.

And see how regular these entrances are, and how they've been finished with very finely cut and dressed stonework.

And those windows are not just holes, they're glazed.'

Aye, and some are broken,' Jamie pointed out.

'So they are,' the Doctor agreed. 'Nevertheless, these are the dwellings of people who live simply, but not necessarily primitively.'

Jamie was still frowning upward.

'How did they get up to those doors, if that's what they are? There's no stairs. Unless they all join up from inside.'

'Perhaps they had ladders,' suggested Victoria, 'and they pulled them up after them for security.'

'I suppose they're all up there now then,' Jamie retorted.

The Doctor was shaking his head. 'The whole place feels quite empty. Broken windows left unrepaired . . . It's been abandoned for some reason.'

'And even if they did have ladders,' Jamie persisted, still 35

sparring with Victoria, 'and stowed all the rest and came down by just the one, that should still be here.'

'They might have hidden it,' said Victoria stoutly, unwilling to abandon her notion.

'Well, the only way to settle the matter is to take a look inside,' said the Doctor, rubbing his hands together in delight at the mystery before them. 'They might have left some belongings behind that will tell us more about them.

Come on.' He took a step towards one of the ground-level openings, suddenly lifted his foot again, bent down and picked up something that had been lying half buried in the sandy soil.

It was a broad bracelet of plastic and metal. One flat face was dotted with tiny press-buttons, dials and a small mesh grille. It was crushed and dented, and part of the casing had split open to reveal the microcircuitry within.

'What is it, Doctor?' asked Victoria.

'Some sort of personal radio, I believe,' said the Doctor, examining the broken device curiously.

'Did it belong to the cliff people, do you think?' wondered Jamie.

'Perhaps, but it's certainly no use to anyone in its present state. I'll examine it further back in the TARDIS.' He slipped the bracelet into his pocket, and they continued once more towards the nearest tunnel mouth. As they got closer they saw that the tunnel roof within angled sharply downward.

Then Jamie stopped abruptly, the hairs on the back of his neck lifting.

They were being watched.

He spun on his heel and froze, cursing the soft sand for giving them no warning.

'Doctor,' he hissed urgently, 'we've got company!' The Doctor turned about and his face fell. 'Oh dear . . .'

Victoria gave a little gasp of alarm and shrank against Jamie's arm.

Five figures in military dress and armed with strangely shaped rifles were standing in a ring facing them.

For a moment both parties eyed each other with mutual curiosity. It was clear the soldiers were almost as surprised by the encounter as the three time travellers.

They were manlike but obviously not human, being tall and slender, with smooth copper-coloured skins. Under their helmets their faces were sharp-featured, with straight angular noses, the fleshy sides of which broadened and spread, merging into prominent cheekbones. Long jaws tapered into thin, pointed chins. Their battledress was curiously indistinct, the lower halves taking on the colour of the soil they stood on, while their tops were still tinted with the colours of the flower forest.

Slowly, the Doctor's face shaped into an uncertain smile.

'How do you do?' he said, extending his hands in a friendly gesture.

The soldiers' fingers tightened on their triggers.

'Get down!' Jamie yelled in alarm, shoving the Doctor and Victoria aside with a single heave and grabbing for his dirk.

The Doctor fell forward onto his hands and knees, while Victoria took an unsteady couple of steps backward and with a cry disappeared down the steep ramp of a tunnel. As she fell the rifles buzzed harshly and bright rays of light lashed out.

Victoria's wild tumble down the ramp came to an end when she landed on a stretch of level floor. Fortunately it was also covered in a layer of the silvery sand and it broke her fall, but for a moment she lay winded, gasping for breath. Only the smoothness and slight curve of the tunnel shaft as it descended had saved her from serious injury, but she still received several scrapes and bruises on the way, and she winced as she tried to sit up. Daylight from the surface was reflected down into the gloom, and by this she could just make out a corridor leading away into the darkness, with several low oval archways leading off from it. Even as she was recovering her wits she heard shouts from above and the pounding of heavy boots. A disc of artificial light splashed off the curving wall of the

ramp shaft. The soldiers were coming down after her!

Instinctively she forced herself to her feet and stumbled away down the corridor and into the darkness.

An angry voice rang out and a second answered it. Two soldiers then. Could she evade them for long? Torchlight flickered at her heels, driving her onward, hands outstretched blindly before her.

Disorientated, she kept barging into the passage walls, adding new grazes to her collection, and once she cracked her head against a low archway.

Ignoring the pain she stumbled dizzily on. Normally she would never have plunged into the darkness of such a catacomb so recklessly, but the need for flight seemed temporarily to blot out her fear of the unknown. How far or how long she ran Victoria could not tell, but eventually her legs gave out and she knew she had to rest for a moment.

She collapsed exhausted into the curve of the tunnel wall, heart thumping, trying to breathe quietly, straining her eyes and ears for the first sign of her pursuers.

Suddenly a shout of alarm echoed through the warren of tunnels, followed by a rapid burst of the strange gunfire. A second voice called out, anxious and questioning, but there was no reply. She heard running feet. Then came another burst of fire, but it was cut short abruptly in a yell of fear.

Then an aching silence descended as the echoes died.

No, not quite silence.

There was a slight scuffling, then a soft scraping that slowly faded away. Her imagination gave form to the new sounds. They were those that might be made by a body being dragged along the sandy ground.

There was someone — or something — else down here in the darkness with her.

Even as this dreadful realization sank in, she heard a soft, rustling tread coming nearer and nearer. Pressing back against the wall, she jammed a knuckle into her mouth to stifle a moan of fear. The steps got closer. She held her breath.

A large body moved past.

Something brushed her arm.

Something coarse that stung her flesh even through the fabric of her dress.

Victoria screamed piercingly and the unseen thing momentarily flinched away. She rolled aside, scrambled to her feet and ran, propelled by stark terror of the unknown horror behind her.

An oval of pale daylight hung at the end of a passageway, seeming almost dazzlingly bright after the darkness of the interior. She sprinted towards it desperately and, sobbing with relief, burst out into the open.

Her feet were suddenly churning thin air.

Behind her the oval doorway and its unrailed ledge drifted up and away. A sheer rockface pocked with more porthole-like windows and doors slid past her at ever-increasing speed. She had travelled right through the cliff dwelling and out the other side, where the land dropped away into a deep gorge.

Victoria's last memory was of her own scream of fear and a dark shape in the air with her. There was an impact. . . and she knew no more.

Six

Captain-Commander Draga, listening to the scout party's report in the communications bay, discovered that Nevon-two had suddenly appeared by her side. She always found the manner in which the Morale and Discipline Officer seemed to arrive out of nowhere disconcerting. Her grey uniform seemed to be nearly as effective as a camouflage suit. Draga suspected she practised the technique secretly, so that nobody could be sure that she would not silently materialize, her pale eyes glinting accusingly, causing her unfortunate victims anxiously to review whatever they had been saying for anything that could be interpreted as critical of the state or the revolution.

Unless she simply took a perverse pleasure in surprising people, of course. No, that was unfair. Draga doubted that Nevon would take any pleasure in such activity. It would be too much like having fun.

'There were no survivors or dead at the reported location of the skirmish with the Imperial intruders,' Scout Commander Coroth's voice continued over the speaker. 'But there was some indication of a trail through the forest, which eventually led to a deserted native settlement. There we found three unidentified aliens.'

'You mean natives?' Draga queried.

'No, Captain. Quite different in appearance.'

'A subspecies we have so far not encountered, perhaps?'

'Possibly, Captain. They were hardly affected by our weapons when set on either native or Rhumon stun frequencies. They claim to have just arrived here, and know nothing of the current situation, but one had a 40

Republic-issue communicator band on him, which I believe came from the missing patrol.'

'They speak the natives' language then?'

'They speak fluent standard Rhumon, Captain.'

For a moment Draga saw a flicker of genuine surprise cross Nevon's thin face, then her natural pinched, sour expression returned, and she leant forward to the microphone.

'This is Nevon-two, Scout Commander. None of the natives speak fluent Rhumon, nor have any ship landings been detected. Clearly this is some sort of Imperial trick.

Bring these "aliens" back here immediately for further examination.'

'Certainly, Officer Nevon.' Coroth sounded uncomfortable. 'Unfortunately, one of the aliens has temporarily eluded us in the settlement tunnels. But we will recover her shortly.'

'I trust that will be so, Commander,' Nevon replied coldly.

' "The inefficiency of a single unit is the bane of the whole."

Remember that.'

'I will, Officer Nevon.'

Beside the towering cliff wall of the abandoned native settlement, Coroth snapped off his communicator and glared at Jamie and the Doctor, who were sitting uncomfortably cross-legged on the ground with hands clasped behind their heads. A soldier stood behind them with the muzzle of his rifle, now set to full power, never far from the back of their necks.

'What are you?' Coroth demanded again. 'Where do you come from?' He held out the broken communicator band recovered from the

Doctor's pocket. 'And where did you get this?'

'We told you already,' Jamie replied angrily. 'We just got here not a couple of hours ago. We found that thing lying on the ground over there, and we don't know anything about this patrol of yours.'

'You are lying! We would have detected any landing in this region. You are tools of the Imperial regime, admit it!'

'We really have just arrived here,' the Doctor said, pacifically. 'My ship is rather, uh, compact. You see, it makes quite unobtrusive landings —'

'When it's working properly,' muttered Jamie.

'Thank you, Jamie. When it's working properly,' continued the Doctor, unabashed. 'It's not far away. We could show it to you, if you like —'

'And lead us into an Imperial trap! Do you take me for a fool?'

The Doctor sighed.

'We do rather seem to be labouring under a misconception here. I assure you we are not part of any sort of plot.'

'We shall see. When we find your companion we will take you back to our base for interrogation by Officer Nevon. And she will not rest until she has discovered the truth!'

The soldier posted by the tunnel mouth Victoria and her pursuers had gone down called out, 'Commander, I can hear something —'

Then came the unmistakable echo of gunfire from below.

Coroth strode to the entrance, gesturing for the guard to bring the Doctor and Jamie, at the same time punching at the buttons on his communicator. As they crowded about the tunnel mouth he tried to contact the two soldiers.

Distantly there came the echo of a second burst of gunfire.

Coroth continued to call, but there was no reply.

'Perhaps the signal is being masked by the rock, Commander,' one of their guards suggested hopefully.

'Perhaps,' said Coroth, tight-lipped.

'What's going on down there?' Jamie demanded angrily.

'If you've harmed Victoria I'll —'

There came the faint echo of a scream, followed by an ominous silence.

'Victoria!' cried Jamie in alarm, trying to rush down into the tunnel only to be prodded back by the rifle of their guard.

'Let us go down,' the Doctor pleaded. 'Can't you see 42

we're simply concerned for our friend's safety. If there is some danger it seems to be an indiscriminate one. For the sake of your own soldiers it might be to our mutual benefit if we all went together.'

'I think this is part of an Imperial conspiracy to lure us all down there, Commander,' one of the remaining soldiers said contemptuously. 'Officer Nevon has lectured us about such duplicity.'

'Fiddlesticks!' snapped the Doctor.

'What about your own people?' fumed Jamie. 'Surely you're not going to abandon them too? Unless you've not got the courage to go down there yourself!'

Coroth stiffened in anger. Very deliberately he removed his helmet. Jamie saw that the Rhumon's head was hairless, slightly elongated and protruding at the back. It was crowned with three spiny crests, equally spaced and presently lying flat, running from his forehead just above his eyebrows over to the base of his skull. The rims of his ears, now revealed, were also spined and covered by a fanlike fleshy membrane. As Jamie watched, Coroth thrust his face at him. His ear membranes folded together and flattened back against his skull, even as his crown crests lifted and coloured a vivid scarlet, as though in ritualistic warning.

'My personal courage or that of the men under my command is not to be questioned! Do you understand?'

Jamie met his gaze unflinchingly.

'Prove it,' he challenged.

Coroth's crests lowered again and he replaced his helmet.

'I will not be drawn by a misplaced sense of honour into making an unwise military decision. They are soldiers. They understand certain sacrifices are necessary for the greater good.'

'But Victoria's no soldier, she's just a girl!'

'Her sex is irrelevant.' He hesitated. 'The People's Army is not insensitive to loyalty and comradeship, but I must take you back to base first. Those are orders. If you satisfy Nevon that you are not in league with the Royals, you may be allowed to return here.' Coroth looked about at the 43

deserted settlement and for a moment his anxiety showed.

'In any case we are now under strength and facing some unknown danger. We need reinforcements before proceeding further.'

'Then call for more help on your radio,' suggested the Doctor. 'We mustn't waste time.'

'It's not safe to reveal our situation now, even with a security-scrambled transmission. Move.'

Though menaced by the soldier's rifles, Jamie was clearly still ready to resist. The Doctor calmed him.

'We've no choice, Jamie,' the Doctor said, his own voice tinged by a rare edge of barely controlled anger. 'We'll have to talk to this Nevon and make her understand.' He glared at Coroth. 'Well come on, then,' he snapped impatiently. 'Do you have transport, or must we walk all the way?'

The Republican party had a small four-wheeled armoured scout car waiting by the stream they had crossed earlier, and they were soon seated in its rear compartment under guard.

Coroth took the controls. The vehicle moved away and Jamie understood why he had not heard it earlier, as its almost silent motors gave only a slight hum and the broad heavily treaded tyres rolled soundlessly over the sandy soil of the forest track.

As they bumped along his thoughts centred on some way of overpowering their captors and returning to search for Victoria. He thought of her scream and he shivered with anger, his fists clenched. Perhaps they were already too late, but he had to know one way or another. He assessed the two soldiers sitting opposite them. Could he

grab their peculiar-looking rifles quickly enough to turn them aside? He looked at the Doctor sitting beside him, staring in apparent glum resignation across the cabin. He had no doubt of his courage, but he sometimes acted unpredictably in a crisis.

Could he count on him to do the right thing if he made an escape attempt? Or perhaps he was planning something himself, lulling the soldiers into a fake sense of security. He could play the dark game when he had to. If only he would give him some sort of sign-44

The explosion slammed the seat up into Jamie's spine, jarring his head back sickeningly and causing his jaw to snap shut so hard he bit his tongue. The scout car keeled over and he and the Doctor fell on top of their startled guards. Recovering his wits first, Jamie elbowed one in the ribs and drove a short jab into the other's prominent jaw. He pulled the Doctor free of the tangle, heaved at the lever on the car's rear hatch, and both of them tumbled out onto the soft sand of the forest floor.

Gunfire flashed and buzzed behind them as they scrambled desperately away on all fours into the shelter of a rocky outcrop which was almost smothered by a palm fern.

Half-seen figures flickered through the trees as the ambushers closed in on the crippled scout car.

'Quickly!'Jamie said.

'Which way?' complained the Doctor. 'I'm all turned around now.'

'Any way, before they're done with each other!'

The exchange of gunfire petered out with inconvenient abruptness.

'Get moving!' hissed Jamie.

They crawled for twenty feet, almost burrowing through the thick tangle of a kind of fragrant ground ivy. Then the Doctor, who was leading, stopped so abruptly that Jamie bumped into him. They both looked up. A row of army boots was ranged across their path. Raising their eyes further they came to the inevitable rifle muzzles of a slightly different design from the Republicans'. A cultured imperious voice said, 'My, my. What odd creatures have the Reps got working for them now?'

'Oh, dear,' sighed the Doctor. 'Not again.'

Relgo-four, Draga's second in command, had joined them in the communications bay. As always, Draga felt relieved by his presence, which did much to alleviate the uncomfortable atmosphere that lingered around Nevon. He was someone Draga knew she could rely on totally: a highly capable first officer without that ambitious streak that caused people to watch their backs. Draga suspected

he was inherently a more natural soldier than she was, but he would never rise above his present rank having found a comfortable niche which stretched his abilities just far enough to be satisfying. The crew liked and respected him, and so did she. The appreciation was mutual and now extended beyond mere comradeship, though they had to be careful in public. Personal relationships of an intimate nature were officially discouraged on active service. They might impair operational judgement.

'Still no contact with Scout Commander Coroth or his patrol, Captain,' the operator reported.

'Any emergency beacons detected?' Nevon asked.

'None, Officer Nevon.'

Nevon paced up and down, her face pinched in thought, her perpetually gloved hands clasped behind her. Draga turned aside to Relgo for a moment to debate sending out a relief party. As she did so she just heard a technician on another console murmur half" under her breath, 'Maybe the ghosts have got them.'

Nevon spun round, eyes flashing angrily.

'Keep your thoughts to yourself, Morli,' Relgo warned pre-emptively. He was too late.

'There are no such things as "ghosts",' said Nevon almost shrilly, striding over to stand over the hapless technician.

'Such things are part of the irrational world picture promoted by tyrants to keep their subjects in their thrall. But we know better. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Officer Nevon.'

'You are debited three penalty marks against your party record,

Operator Morli, for spreading false rumours table to incite unrest and contrary to revolutionary doctrine. You will report to my cabin after your duty period, where I will provide you with suitable corrective reading, which you will study before your next service review, when particular attention will be paid to your mental fitness. That is all.'

Morli swallowed and bent over her console again. Nevon strode up to Relgo and Draga.

'These rumours must not be allowed to spread,' she 46

warned them coldly. 'Or else such fantasies may become an excuse for carelessness and inefficiency. This should be a special concern of yours, Commander Relgo.'

'I've found it wise to turn a deaf ear to the odd word out of place from time to time,' Relgo replied evenly.

Nevon's face twitched, as though in a sneer, and Draga thought she saw her crest lift slightly.

'I had thought you a competent officer and good Republican. Do you wish me to revise my estimate for my next service report?'

'Commander Relgo's record and loyalty are both beyond question,' Draga cut in. 'I would suggest, Officer Nevon, that you confine your activities to more serious breaches of discipline in future, and not look for disaffection where there is none.'

'Yes, I expect you would say that, Captain-Commander,'

Nevon said meaningfully, her gaze flickering for a moment between Draga and Relgo. 'Very well. In that capacity I notify you that I will also be debiting Scout Commander Coroth's record for inefficiency, if he does not arrive with the three alien prisoners within the hour.' And Nevon turned on her heel and left the command centre.

Draga let the last threat go unchallenged. Coroth might already have lost more than an efficiency mark.

Jamie watched as Coroth's surviving squadman put a field dressing on his superior's wounded upper arm. He and the Doctor were once more sitting down under guard with their hands clasped behind their heads. The officer who commanded the ambushers strutted curiously around the Doctor and Jamie, turning the communicator bands he had removed from the Republican soldiers over in his hands as he did so.

'I am Lieutenant Dal Paamas, House Mallifant. You are my prisoners. You will be treated in accordance with military law. . . which is more than you Reps deserve,' he added contemptuously.

'Er. . . excuse me,' said the Doctor unctuously, 'but we're not actually Reps, or indeed part of your dispute 47

here, and we do have urgent business elsewhere . . .' he trailed off as the lieutenant bent over him.

'I do not know what you are, alien. But you were travelling with Reps, and that is enough for me.'

'We were their prisoners!'Jamie protested.

'That's true,' Coroth said bitterly, wincing as his bandage was tightened. 'We thought they were your creatures.'

Paarnas laughed dryly.

'And I'm supposed to take your word for it, am I? You will all be taken back to base for further interrogation. If you are finished, we shall move now.'

'What about my squadman?' Coroth demanded, nodding to the smoking remains of the scout car where the arm of a soldier still hung limply from the rear hatch. 'You may have killed him with your overzealous attack, but by law he is still permitted a proper burial.'

Paarnas appeared unmoved.

'There is no time. Especially since you Reps took to concealing the corpses of our glorious dead. You don't think we believed your denials. No doubt you wished to hide the signs of their treatment at your hands.'

'Never!' Coroth responded vehemently. 'It's you who have defiled our dead. But by their blood we shall win this world for the Republic!'

'You don't suppose -' began the Doctor mildly.

'Be quiet!' Paarnas shouted, as an Imperial halftrack appeared and drove up to the party, running on the same, almost silent, motors as those of the Republican scout car.

'Get them all into the transport.'

The Doctor, Jamie and the two Republican soldiers were forced into the vehicle at gunpoint, and it rolled quietly away through the forest towards the Imperial base.

For a while nothing stirred about the ruined scout car and its grisly remains. Then there was a rustling in the undergrowth and the silent watchers appeared to claim the reward for their patience.

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Seven

Ja mie fumed with barely controlled anxiety and impatience during the journey in the Imperial transporter, a journey that was longer than he expected. He tried to note any landmarks he could make out through the slit windows of the vehicle's rear cabin, in case they had a chance to retrace their route, but soon he got hopelessly confused by the twisting plant-forest tracks, interspersed with rugged canyons, cratered plateaus ringed by sheer walls and narrow ravines. Finally, just when he thought he could keep still no longer, they turned into a narrow valley and the forest thinned out. They had a brief glimpse of a wall of earth and stone, topped by a stockade fence of the thicker plant stems lashed together, behind which sentries could be seen standing guard. The transporter passed through a double gateway constructed of more local 'timber' and rolled to a stop. The doors opened and Jamie, the Doctor, Coroth and the surviving Rep soldier climbed out.

They were in a large rectangular compound enclosed by the almost sheer sides of the valley and two man-made stockade walls spanning between them. Ladders zigzagged up the cliff faces to watchposts on their summits. A small stream issued from the base of one of the cliffs to form a pool from which pipes ran. Opposite the gateway a large banner hung from a pole, bearing the device of a gold crown over a sun and radiants, set on a blue field. Below it was a smaller banner displaying a more complex design like a family coat of arms. There was much activity within the compound and about the various structures built of local materials that lined the inside of the walls, but everything was dominated by the

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bulk of a spacecraft in its centre. Even to Jamie's untrained, eyes it was obviously damaged. It was a thick double saucer of grey metal

almost four hundred feet in diameter, resting on six massive support legs, half of which were twisted and askew, causing the craft to rest at a slight angle. Blackened scars marred its smooth lines, and a latticework of native plant stalk scaffolding concealed part of the hull.

Coroth, nursing his wounded arm, managed a chuckle of satisfaction at the sight.

'So, despite all the boasts, you are still repairing the damage we did to you.'

'Take them to the workers' hut,' Paarnas snapped. 'These two' - he indicated Jamie and the Doctor — 'are to come with me.'

The party divided up and Coroth and the soldier were marched away.

'It's most important that we speak to somebody in authority immediately,' the Doctor reminded Paarnas as they were led towards the ship.

'You will be examined and interrogated, alien,' Paarnas replied curtly. 'Those in authority will interest themselves in you if and when they choose, not before.'

'But we told you,' Jamie said, 'our friend may be lost or hurt-'

'Be quiet!' rapped Paarnas dangerously.

'What is this?' boomed a commanding voice.

An older Rhumon sporting a long straggling beard, and dressed in a yellow robe rather like a monk's habit, was standing at the head of a ramp leading up to one of the ship's airlocks. Paarnas quickly made a slight bow as he reached the foot of the ramp.

'These are the two aliens we reported, Father. They are disrespectful and undisciplined.'

'I see,' said the priest, striding down the ramp and circling the Doctor and Jamie, looking them over curiously. 'What strange misshapen creatures they are, to be sure.'

'Hey!' began Jamie angrily.

'And who,' enquired the Doctor patiently, nudging Jamie in the ribs

with his elbow, 'do we have the honour of addressing?'

'I am Modeenus, servant of Omnimon, Hand of the Church of Rhumos on this world. I shall examine you to determine your origins and fitness.'

'Most interesting, I'm sure. But perhaps it would be quicker if I just explained —'

'Silence!'

'Och, forget it, Doctor,' shouted Jamie, his temper breaking. 'We've no time for any more of this nonsense!'

'Protest further and you will die here and now,' Modeenus continued. 'I have but to give the order.' Paamas drew his pistol and held it to the Doctor's forehead. The Doctor's eyes crossed as they tried to focus on the barrel.

'Of course, if you absolutely insist,' he said quickly.

Victoria recovered her senses to the accompaniment of two angry voices raised in dispute. For a moment she thought it was the Doctor and Jamie arguing, but it didn't really sound like them, and in any case the words didn't seem to make sense. Then, as if a switch had closed within her head, she suddenly understood.

'So, if one Rep is better than ten Imperials, why didn't all that superiority stop them from capturing you as well?'

'This is not a crude contest of strength. Our worth is measured by the contribution each individual can make to the furtherance of our cause. We do not claim to be supermen, or protected by some mythical deity. Where was your precious Omnimon when they took you?'

'We do not expect our every step to be guided by the divine hand. Life is a rocky path to be trodden on the way to final salvation. By our labours in adversity we shall be judged when it is time to go beyond this life, to dwell with him in the eternal light of the central fire that is the source of all life.'

'The sun! You worship a ball of fusing hydrogen!'

'That is merely its outward manifestation. If you had faith

-'

'I have my own faith. Faith in order and the common struggle of the masses against oppression. We create our own heaven in this life.'

'Surprised you can create anything with such poor imaginations.'

'What do you mean?'

'You can't even think of proper names for yourselves, so you use numbers.'

'That is efficiency. We have done away with superfluous titles. They are the tools of supremacists that undermine equality and create disaffection.'

'They are proud records of our family heritage and noble antecedents. Do you still have families on New Rhumos, or have they also been abolished for greater efficiency?'

'Of course we have families, you stupid Imperial lackey!'

'Heathen Rep!'

As Victoria listened to the peculiar exchange with rather detached curiosity, she attempted to marshall her confused thoughts. What had happened? She had been dreaming of falling... She sat up with a gasp, heart thumping. It had been no dream. But who or what had saved her? She blinked and rubbed her eyes, peering about her anxiously.

She was resting on a bed of soft dry moss inside a crude but effective cage built of thick plant stems lashed together.

It was set in a small cave carpeted with the familiar pale sand, which opened onto some larger space through a roughly hewn archway. The cave was lit by more of the glowing ivy flowers she had seen in the forest, which grew up one wall and across most of the ceiling. As her eyes adjusted she saw there were two other cages opposite her own. Each was occupied by a man of the same race as the soldiers who had waylaid them earlier, except these two wore no weapons or camouflaged suits, just lightweight tunics and trousers. They were also both bareheaded and she saw their folded ears and spiny crests flushed and raised in anger. The

likeness suddenly came to her of two fighting cockerels displaying their crests and wattles in a show of defiance.

The analogy made her feel a httle less frightened by the strange beings. Besides, locked in their own cages they were quite incapable of doing her any harm.

As she stirred they ceased trading insults and looked across.

'Oh, she's awake. What is she anyway?'

'Never seen one like that before. At least this kind actually looks a bit more female — except for that fur on her head.'

'Must be from another part of the planet. Hey, you girl: tell us where you come from, eh?'

Their observations and brusque enquiry annoyed Victoria, temporarily banishing any diffidence she might have felt. At least she knew the proprieties.

'There is no need to speak like that — I understand you perfectly well, thank you,' she replied coldly. 'And I am not a "she": I am Miss Victoria Waterfield.'

The two crested aliens seemed surprised.

'She speaks Rhumon very well. Who taught her?'

'Was that a name or a title?'

'Hasn't anybody ever told you it's rude to talk about somebody in their presence like that?' Victoria continued cuttingly. 'Especially when you have not had the courtesy to introduce yourselves in return. Or do you not know how to speak to a lady?'

'I am Vo Annolos, Clan Marrakat, geotechnician in the service of his Imperial Majesty's space force,' one announced with some hauteur. 'And I well know how to address a lady ... if that is what you are.'

'I am Squad Commander Torth-eight of the People's Republican Army,' the other added quickly, with no less pride. 'And I too know and observe the common courtesies due to all free citizens without favour.' His eyes narrowed.

'Do you claim you are a "lady" by rank or title?'

'A lady is recognized by her manner and deportment,'

Victoria replied primly. Torth looked doubtful, continuing to regard her suspiciously. Quickly Victoria added, 53

'Can you please tell me where we are . . . and how I got here?'

'We're in some native hideaway of course,' Annolos said bitterly. "The miserable ingrates caught you like they did me and this Rep here.'

"The natives? You mean this is not your world?'

Annolos looked at her with even more wonder.

'Naturally not. We are Rhumon, of course. And just what are you, alien "lady", and where are you from?'

Just then a shadow fell across the entrance archway.

Victoria gave a gasp of alarm, shrinking against the rear of her cage as a grotesque creature entered the cave.

It was a gigantic ant standing as tall as she was. The soft light gleamed off its glossy black carapace. Powerful mandibles extended from its bulbous triangular head, above which two huge lidless eyes seemed to glow in the dimness.

Two of its six legs had hypertrophied, bearing its whole weight and allowing its remaining limbs to be held forward clear of the ground. Hooked between its front pair was a large double-handled pitcher. As Victoria looked on fearfully it approached the cages of the two men, twisted its great head about for a moment, then proceeded to pour water from the pitcher with surprising delicacy into the smaller jugs she saw were set just outside the bars until they were both filled. Then it turned to the jug set beside her cage, which was still full. It hesitated, regarding her and it uncertainly, then turned and waddled out through the archway.

'What was that?' she gasped once the thing had gone.

'One of the natives' work beasts,' Torth replied. 'Harmless enough... as long as you don't try to cross it. Those mandibles could take your arm off.' Victoria shuddered.

Torth frowned at her. 'Surely you've seen them before?'

'No, never.' Victoria sighed. 'We've only just arrived here.

We don't even know what world this is.'

'Rhumos Twelve, of course,' said Torth, 'from its place in our system.'

'By Imperial decree this world was named Mallaveria,'

Annolos countered. The two bristled at each other again 54

through the bars. Victoria could almost feel the animosity between them, and she thought they would be at each other's throat if they had the chance.

'What do the natives call it?' Victoria asked quickly.

Before she could get a reply three new figures entered the cave. They were not as alarming as the giant ant, but they were far stranger in appearance than Annolos or Torth, perhaps because they were otherwise almost manlike. They approached with light, graceful steps and stood before Victoria's cage looking down at her with large, glittering, expressionless insect eyes.

Folded across their backs were large translucent wings. A cowl of fur with tiger-stripe markings covered their heads and necks and ran down over their shoulders. They had no visible ears, but two long trembling antennae rose from the sides of their heads. Beneath their compound eyes was a severe downturned slit of a mouth. Bands of pale fur ran about their wrists and ankles and around their trunks and leg joints. Between them was dark carapace material that seemed more pliant than that of the giant ant. She realized their hands had no fingers, only thumbs and long flexible tapering palms.

'What are you?' the first asked.

'You like others, but not like,' added the second one.

'Where come you from?' demanded the third.

They spoke the same language as her fellow prisoners but shaped their words with difficulty, though their voices in themselves were not unpleasant, being soft, high and fluting.

'My . . . my name is Victoria Waterfield. I come from Earth.'

'Earth,' the first repeated slowly, trying out the name.

'You are of them?' the second asked, pointing at Torth and Annolos.

'No, I'm not. I have only just met them. I was lost in some dark tunnels. I fell. Did you bring me here?'

'You with Rhumon soldiers,' the third stated. 'You speak their words, you of same kind, like them.'

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'No! Can't you tell I'm different? I was running away from them,' Victoria insisted.

'We find truth,' the first of the strange creatures said decisively.

He produced a key and unlocked the door of her cage.

The other two took Victoria gently but firmly by the arms and pulled her onto her feet. She thought the touch of their hands would be unpleasant, but they were surprisingly pliant and warm.

'Where are you taking me?' she protested, struggling feebly.

To find truth.'

She gave one despairing glance at Torth and Annolos before she was led through the archway. Beyond it was a lofty cavern illuminated by more of the lantern ivy. Its sides were stepped by ledges and galleries, onto which several other chambers and tunnels opened. As she was hurried along she saw several of the winged men going about their business, together with more of the huge ants, which she flinched away from. Bumbling past them on many rippling legs came something resembling a giant woodlouse, standing higher than her knee and sporting a long tapering snout. Down one side tunnel she glimpsed the hunched forms of beings like shrunken versions of her captors, busily engaged in cutting away at a rockface with sharp spars of some glittering mineral. Everywhere there were signs of purposeful activity, and she began to appreciate the complexity of this strange subterranean community.

Then they entered a small chamber that was furnished differently from anything else she had so far seen. There were shelves around the walls stacked with strangely formed pieces of machinery, and from somewhere came the hum of electrical power. Winged men worked at benches over intricate crystals and fine mechanisms. Perhaps these creatures were more intelligent than she had at first suspected.

One piece of equipment stood out from the rest. It was a complex

by turns of wire and mounted on a gimballed stand. A winged man was already standing by it, as though waiting for their arrival. Before Victoria knew what was happening, she had been taken to a blank section of wall facing the strange device. Her arms were stretched out and cold manacles snapped about her wrists. 'No! Please, don't!'

The winged men took no notice, but simply retreated behind the device, which was turned to point directly at her.

She pulled futilely at her bonds.

There was a thrum of power and a pale beam lashed out, enveloping her in an aura of flickering light.

Victoria screamed.

The Imperial spaceship's chapel was the most richly decked place Jamie had ever seen.

Inside the big double doors electric candlelight sparkled off the jewel-encrusted gold trimmings of altar regalia, an ornate lectern holding some gold- and jewel-bound religious tome and even the gilt frames of the paintings showing richly dressed folk at prayer. Behind the altar hung a triangular golden shield decorated with more precious stones. Set incongruously in an alcove to one side was a complicated bank of machinery standing beside a man-sized cubical.

'The integral analyser,' Modeenus explained. 'There we shall discover the truth. You first, alien.'

The Doctor was prodded forward by the guards into the cubical and a transparent cylinder descended closing him in.

Modeenus made a complicated gesture with his hands as though of obeisance, then threw a switch. The indicator lights flickered over the transparent cylinder causing the Doctor to flinch in alarm. As a buzzing tone rose to a shrill crescendo he plugged his ears. Instrument dials flickered and lines of coloured light danced across screens. After a minute the light and sound died. The cylinder rose, releasing the Doctor, who patted himself in relief as though checking he was unharmed. Modeenus

studied the readings curiously, then said, 'Put the next one in.'

Jamie looked uncertain. The Doctor said reassuringly, 'It's all right, Jamie. It doesn't hurt.'

Reluctantly, Jamie entered the cylinder and the sequence was repeated. Meters and displays flickered and Modeenus noted the readings with mounting surprise. As Jamie was released from the cylinder, Paarnas asked Modeenus respectfully, 'Is there something wrong with them, Father?'

'They are truly alien beings, Lieutenant,' Modeenus admitted, indicating the numbers and jagged lines on the display screens. 'Though similar in outward appearance, they differ from each other as well. Their patterns are unique. But they are certainly not native to this world, nor our own system.'

'Well we could have told you that ourselves if only you'd given us the chance,' the Doctor said. 'We're travellers from

-'

'Be silent!' Paarnas snapped.

'Let him speak,' Modeenus directed.

'Thank you,' said the Doctor. 'It's perfectly simple. We arrived on this world quite by chance, and were examining a most interesting deserted settlement when the soldiers you call Reps found us and our friend got lost. They were taking us back to their headquarters when the lieutenant here ambushed them. And that's all. Now, if you've finished we would really like to be getting back to look for our friend.'

'I have not finished,' Modeenus said sharply. 'I must meditate on the more detailed readings of your moralities and spiritual quotient. They are very strange.'

'Spirit... morality?' the Doctor exclaimed. 'No machine can measure those qualities.'

'The integral analyser is the highest product of Imperial science, blessed and approved by the First Hand of the Church himself. You cannot hope to understand its complexities.'

'Oh, I don't know,' the Doctor replied, shuffling over

to the bank of equipment beside the cubical and peering intently at the displays, tapping a few panels apparently at random and tracing pathways with his fingertip. 'You are using a, ah . .. focused multifrequency subnuclear particle projector? Yes? And wide-band detector array coils connected to a . . . transducing amplifier, a pattern recognition filter, memory bank and solid-state display screens.'

He stepped back again, pleased with his analysis. 'Yes, it's really quite sophisticated. Most impressive.' He beamed at Modeenus in a disconcertingly amiable manner, then his eyes narrowed and he added sharply, 'But to suggest that its results can tell you anything about our spirit or morals, no matter how long you meditate over them, is absolute nonsense!'

The glow of energy faded around Victoria, leaving only a slight tingling sensation. She sagged against her bonds in relief. She was unhurt! The strange creatures were gathered around the equipment wired to the gunlike device, talking among themselves in low voices. Only one of them, more slender than the others and who she took to be female, was looking at her in a manner that, despite her expressionless eyes, conveyed concern.

'We have caused her distress,' she said aloud. 'She did not understand the nature of the experiment. We are becoming like them.'

'It is necessary, Nallia,' another replied, sparing Victoria a brief glance. 'We are at war, and they are the enemy. We must be strong.'

'But she is of a different kind. If she was Rhumon the weapon would have rendered her unconscious.'

'Yes, that is true. What is she?' There was a renewed murmur of puzzled conversation.

Victoria was surprised. The creatures sounded more cultured and fluent than they had before. It was as though they had been speaking a foreign language then, but were now conversing in their own tongue. But to her it all sounded like slightly accented English. How was that possible? Unless . . . What had the Doctor once said 59

to her about language and travelling in the TARDIS?

Wherever we go you will never have any trouble understanding anybody. Apparently it was true.

'Will you please release me now?' she said aloud, in what she hoped

were firm tones. 'I am nothing to do with those other people in the cages. I'm a traveller . . . from a world called Earth.' The winged creatures gathered around her in surprise.

'She speaks clearly!'

She felt the touch of their strange slender hands again and tried not to flinch. But it seemed now as though they were examining her with more wonder and disbelief than clinical curiosity.

'No Rhumon is so skilled in our language,' Nallia exclaimed, tilting her head from side to side in graceful interest as she regarded her. 'It must be as she said. She is not a Rhumon.'

'I'm not,' Victoria said. 'Believe me. Please let me go.'

'Release her,' said Nallia, with a note of command in her soft, piping words. The shackles were unfastened and Victoria rubbed her wrists gratefully. She looked into the ring of large, glittering eyes and tried a reassuring smile. For the first time she realized there was a faint scent about them.

Slightly sharp, like lemon and cinnamon, but not at all unpleasant. The winged woman spoke to her earnestly.

'I am called Nallia, daughter of Krestus who is our leader.

If you are indeed a traveller, then you have chosen a sad time to visit our world . . .'

Modeenus felt the righteous anger building inside him.

Paarnas and the guards had already recoiled at the alien's words. Incredibly the small, stocky creature seemed ready to defy all of them while his companion stood by his side, clenching his fists.

'You've done it now, Doctor!' Modeenus heard him mutter.

Modeenus raised his staff with a trembling hand. 'I condemn you for blasphemy by association and insulting the holy order!' he spat.

'It's the truth,' the other repeated brazenly.

'Let the power of Omnimon flow through me and strike these heretics down!'

Blue sparks streamed from the tip of his staff.

The aliens jerked and writhed in their crackling embrace, their faces contorted with pain, then fell to the floor.

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Eight

odeenus – stop this at once!'

'M The voice cut through the crackle of energy, which itself ceased a moment later. The Doctor and Jamie slumped limply on the floor, gasping for breath. Looking up weakly they saw that a new figure had entered the chapel and was standing before the priest. He was immaculately dressed in a knife-creased dark-green uniform, with brilliantly polished rank insignia and a gold sash across his chest. His thin spiny beard, which all the male Rhumon they had seen so far wore, was neatly trimmed, contrasting with Modeenus's rather unkempt affair.

'Who are these creatures?' the newcomer demanded.

'The unidentified aliens Lieutenant Paarnas reported, Lord Shallvar,' said Modeenus.

'I wish to be informed of their arrival so I might be present at their interrogation. Why was this not done?'

'I apologize for my haste, Lord Captain. I was . . . eager to learn the truth about them.'

'Apparently you were also eager to kill them. How would that increase our knowledge?'

'Their behaviour necessitated punishment, Lord. They are heretics and blasphemers.'

'Well continue later, if you must,' Shallvar allowed, casually. 'But do learn a little patience.'

The priest inclined his head the merest fraction in acknowledgement. 'It will be as you say, Lord Captain,' he agreed flatly.

'Now, what have we here?' Shallvar turned to the Doctor and Jamie,

who had picked themselves hesitantly up from the floor. 'Strange creatures indeed.'

'Well at least he didn't call us "misshapen" again,' Jamie muttered.

'Oh, they talk.'

The Doctor made a little bow.

'We do indeed, talk, um . . . Lord Captain. We are grateful for your timely intervention, but I'm afraid your hospitality in general leaves something to be desired.'

'I command an outpost on a strange and sometimes hostile world, alien,' he replied. 'Hospitality is limited to those who deserve it. Now, who are you and where are you from?'

Lieutenant Paarnas related the Doctor's account of their arrival. Modeenus showed him the readings obtained by the lation. Shallvar looked them over, then shook his head, frowning at the captives. 'I don't know what you are, but I am certain no spacecraft could have landed undetected within our zone of jurisdiction. And you were also found in the company of Reps.'

'How many times must we tell you? We were their prisoners!'Jamie said with exasperation.

'Until I believe you or prove otherwise,' Shallvar replied smoothly.

'We can only speak the truth,' the Doctor retorted. 'And we must return to look for our companion. There was something unknown and perhaps dangerous in those tunnels. Two of the Rep soldiers disappeared down there as well. Ask their commander.'

'Perhaps I shall.' Shallvar turned to Paarnas, 'Meanwhile there is no need to come to any hasty conclusion about them. If they are in league with the natives or the Reps, they do not seem to pose much of a threat.' The Doctor looked insulted. 'Let them work with the slaves for a day or two.

That may induce them to reconsider their story.'

'Slaves?' repeated the Doctor angrily. 'You practise slavery? That's monstrous!'

'It is natural that the strong should order the lives of the weak,' Shallvar countered, automatically. 'It is a way that has served us well.'

'Slavery grants those misguided unfortunates the chance to contemplate the wisdom of Omnimon, and purify their souls through labour dedicated to his purpose,' Modeenus added. 'I shall pray for your own redemption.'

'There may come a day when your slaves prove stronger than you think,' the Doctor said.

'Then we shall deserve to fall,' Shallvar replied calmly.

'Take them away.'

Paarnas and the guards escorted the Doctor and Jamie out of the laboratory. As they were led back to the airlock, Jamie edged closer to the Doctor and asked in a worried whisper, 'Doctor. That priest fellow's staff. . . was there really some devilish power in it?'

'Of course not,' the Doctor huffed. 'High-voltage discharge tubes, most likely. Parlour tricks to impress the credulous. Wastes a lot of energy I should think. Don't take any notice.'

'Be quiet,' commanded Paarnas.

In silence they left the ship and headed for one of the structures built against the perimeter wall of the compound.

On the way they passed close to a party of prisoners carrying a length of metal spar presumably intended for the repair work. Jamie saw that a couple were Republican soldiers, but the others, though manlike in general form, were of another race entirely. They seemed to have wings and —

'They're Menoptera,' the Doctor exclaimed incredulously, blinking for a moment, looking about him with sudden understanding, 'and this must be Vortis!' Suddenly he rounded on Paarnas like an angry terrier, causing the soldier to flinch away in surprise.

'But why are you treating them like this? They're peaceful people, not slaves! What's been happening here?'

'The time of the new bud was on Vortis. The evil Animus, part spider

part plant, which had tried to absorb all life on Vortis into its planetwide web, was defeated, though at great cost. We Menoptera, who had been forced to shelter on our bleak moons during the struggle,

could return to our true home once more and set about rebuilding. The land blossomed and the blight passed out of living memory. Then a new star was seen to be growing brighter in our skies. Some spoke of the final meeting with the Gods of Light that our legends foretold. Alas, it was not to be.'

Krestus paused, as though weighed down with despair.

Nallia touched his arm with her palm tip in a delicate gesture of sympathy. Victoria sensed the Menoptera leader's sadness and said nothing.

They were in Krestus's private chamber, seated on dome-shaped hassocks of moss. It was a simple room, lit by more of the ubiquitous lantern ivy. A few niches in the rock walls were stacked with thin wafers of slate, which she suspected might be their equivalent of books. On a stone table before them were a pitcher and a set of goblets of what seemed to be fine porcelain. Krestus had offered her a drink of water from it after his daughter had introduced them, and Victoria accepted it with grave politeness, guessing the gesture had symbolic significance. She was already overcoming her initial surprise at associating with creatures that more closely resembled giant butterflies than anything else. They were certainly more sympathetic than the two men in the cages, and there was an undeniable and reassuring dignity about Nallia's father that transcended all boundaries of species. She now appreciated the Doctor's admonition made earlier that day. People could live simply, yet not be unsophisticated.

'The Rhumon came in two spaceships larger than any we had ever built,' Krestus continued. 'We welcomed them in peace, assuming they lived in harmony with themselves as we did. Some believed them to be sent from the light we were approaching and bore messages from our Gods, and so hailed them as prophets. Little did we suspect their incomprehensible hatred of each other. As soon as some simple understanding was established we discovered they were engaged in a strange half-war, as was their whole star system, and had each

claimed a foothold on Vortis to deny the other. Their two ships fought in our skies, and both fell crippled to earth. But by now their disparate teachings had taken hold with some of our people, who said this was but a test of our belief. But whose word should we trust: Imperial or Republican? Or were the newcomers simply an evil force to be resisted?

Indecision and uncertainty were our undoing, and this part of Vortis was subdued and divided as each side claimed territory for itself and enforced a perimeter isolating them from the rest of Vortis. We survivors, with the secret aid of those free lands beyond the perimeter, created this base and other retreats within the land the Republicans and Imperials rule. That was some four hundred risings ago. We give shelter to those refugees from the villages under Rhumon control, monitor their actions and frustrate them when we can, though it sometimes seems our efforts are but the stings of sand mites to them.'

It was impossible not to feel sympathy for the Menoptera's plight. Victoria said gently, 'I wish I could do something for you.'

'Thank you,' Nallia replied gravely, 'but it is not your concern.'

'But I do know someone who may be able to help - a very wise and kind man. The Doctor is sure to —'

Both the Menoptera's heads jerked up, and their antennae trembled and flexed alertly.

'The Doc-tor?' Krestus repeated slowly, as though to confirm what he had heard. 'During the struggle with the Animus a stranger came to Vortis with three companions of his kind. He was called the Doctor. He helped us penetrate to the very heart of the Animus so it might be destroyed. His name is remembered and held high with us.'

It was Victoria's turn to be surprised.

'He's been here before? Of course, he did think the land looked familiar, and he says the TARDIS can travel almost anywhere.'

'TARDIS,' Krestus said with a distinct note of eagerness.

'Yes. The stories tell of a machine by that name, that 66

could pass between the worlds in the blink of an eye.'

'That's right. It travels through time and space. I'm sure the Doctor can help you again.' Victoria's face suddenly fell.

'But I was forgetting. Those soldiers must have taken him and Jamie.'

Krestus reassured her.

'The scout who saved you from your fall and brought you here reported that it was the Republicans who were pursuing you. If they have your friends we shall know where to look for them.' He hesitated. 'Though there is danger. Their weapons are attuned to particular body-resonance frequencies. Many of our people have been shot from out of the air by them. We have captured some weapons, more powerful than our own, which we are modifying. They can be set to kill, as we know to our cost, but we needed Rhumon of both factions to test the delicate tuning of the stun effect, so we may conserve their power.'

'I think I understand. Was that what you were doing with me?'

'Yes, friend Victoria,' Nallia said. 'We know only what the invaders have told us about their home worlds, and you may have been a related race to theirs. But to our surprise none of the wavelengths close to theirs affected you. I am sorry for your discomfort.'

'Oh, that is all forgiven now,' said Victoria, trying to sound dismissive of her ordeal.

'And now you must rest. Tomorrow we shall begin making secret enquiries after your friends.'

At the thought of sleep Victoria had to stifle a yawn.

Yes, I would very much like to rest, thank you. I just hope Jamie and the Doctor are safe, that's all.'

'If you have hope then hold on to it tightly,' Nallia said. 'I sometimes think it is all that sustains us.'

'Well this is a fine mess we're in now, Doctor,' Jamie complained bitterly, as they struggled to roll the block of stone into a native-built barrow.

A quarter of a mile along the valley from the Imperial 67

compound, part of the rockface had collapsed, leaving a fan-shaped

scree slope composed of rocks and boulders of all sizes. The Imperials were using it as a source of building materials to raise and strengthen their defensive walls. A working party of perhaps twenty Menoptera and seven or eight Republican prisoners were already quarrying it when they arrived. Their fellow prisoners had given a few curious glances, but otherwise ignored them. Their guards allowed no time for gawping. They saw that Coroth had also been set to work, despite his injured arm.

They eventually tumbled the boulder into the barrow.

'It could be worse,' the Doctor replied, puffing slightly.

'And what about Victoria? '

'I haven't forgotten her, Jamie, you can be sure.'

They trundled the barrow over to a halftrack that had had its rear cabin roof removed, transforming it into a simple open-backed truck. With a rush they ran the barrow up the tailgate ramp and tipped the boulder out with a crash. They started down again for another load.

'It would take a while to walk back to the settlement we lost Victoria in, wouldn't it, Jamie?' the Doctor observed.

'Aye, but -'

'Even if we could find the way,' 'But we've got to try.'

'Of course, but wouldn't it be easier if we had transport and perhaps a guide to help us?' He gave a meaningful glance at the vehicle they had just left.

'Oh . . . aye, yes.' Jamie caught on. 'I'm with you now.'

'So have a little patience. It might save time in the long run.'

'But what about those things?' He nodded at a ring of small limpet-shaped metallic domes that were dotted in a ring around the work area, set about ten yards apart. A couple of guards patrolled on the other side. 'An energy fence, that Paarnas fellow called it. Their people can pass safely but anybody else will be knocked out - or worse.'

'Oh, I'm sure it's very clever,' the Doctor agreed. 'A low-power sensor field tuned to certain body resonances that triggers a higher-powered

charge if it is disturbed. Quick and easy to erect, energy-efficient and harmless to their own soldiers.' His eyes gleamed secretively. 'But I think they may have overlooked something. Just as long as they don't question Coroth . . .'

Torth would have preferred almost anybody else as a cellmate, but at least arguing with Annolos over the conduct of old battles and politics took his mind off whatever the natives had planned for him. He had spent three days without any companionship before they brought Annolos in, and it had not been pleasant. There was only so much shouting and abuse you could expend on the natives or their servants, he had discovered. It had left far too long for brooding.

He had reviewed his life, trying to conjure up images of all his family and friends. It had been hard in places. The perennial shortages, assessment and training, the long duties, the strain of the ongoing struggle. But there had been happy times as well. There was a certain comfort in routine, he decided, however dreary. The yearly reunion with his compeers from the Revolutionary Youth Movement, preparations for the grand Workers' Day parade in Central Square, the celebrations afterwards, when even the state police turned a blind eye to unlicensed gatherings. He pulled out a slim wallet from his pocket and looked at the photograph within. It was Maltis-twelve. She was only a plain girl; counter attendant at Bakery Dispensary five in his home urban block, but she made him happy when they were together. They had put in a request for an official marriage contract when he finished this tour of duty. He found himself wiping his eyes, hastily put the picture away and looked over at Annolos. But the man seemed to be slumped in the corner of his cell half asleep.

As he watched him, Torth realized he had arrived at the not unsurprising conclusion that he wanted more 69

than anything to go home. He missed it. But that was wrong, surely. He was a professional soldier. Should he not be proud to spread the Republican ideal to a new world?

Perhaps that was the problem: it was he who was not ideal.

There was a paradox involved somewhere. A perfect, rational system of government that had to rely on imperfect people to function within it. He shook his head. A year out here had dampened his revolutionary ardour, he decided -

then automatically looked over his shoulder in case Nevon-two might

be standing there. He chuckled to himself. Well, to Imperial sinners' hell with her. What did he care what the natives believed anyway? If he got out of this alive he'd tell her to . . . He sighed. No. He'd get on with his job by the numbers and hope the relief flight came soon. Meanwhile he wouldn't reveal his uncertainty before the Imperial tech.

He still had his pride, after all. He considered Annolos again. Did the younger man realize he had been crying out in fear while he was still half conscious? Torth could have taunted him with the fact. . . yet he had decided not to. They each kept shameful secrets. It was probably the only thing they had in common.

Draga looked long and hard at Nevon-two sitting stiffly opposite her. They were in her own cabin, alone apart from Relgo, and she didn't have to be quite so circumspect with her words.

'You're the Morale Officer! Can't you see this is good for morale?'

'And I am also responsible for discipline.' Nevon's thin gloved fingers poked at the small collection of finely wrought gold pins and badges on the table before her in a disapproving manner. 'A frivolous and decadent use of a scarce metal. Typically Imperial. Their presence may unduly influence the personnel, by promoting undesirable distinctions and individual acquisitiveness. I cannot permit that.'

'But the rest will be encouraged to go out and win some of their own,' Draga countered. 'Isn't that desirable?'

'Your words are ill-chosen, Captain-Commander.

“Winning” in this context implies combat can be turned into a form of contest, which may in turn reduce efficiency.'

'It's a tradition,' Relgo pointed out. 'Captured Imperial insignia have always been shared out as trophies.'

'But not an officially sanctioned one. I have consulted the regulations, and there is no mention of the approved method of division of such prizes. I have communicated your request to the relevant department for a ruling, but until then these items remain in my keeping.' She gathered and pocketed the tokens, then rose.

'If that is all, Captain-Commander?'

'Yes,' sighed Draga.

Nevon turned for the door, then paused briefly.

'I should have mentioned. As Commander Coroth has failed to return with the aliens as ordered, the demerits will be entered on his record as I stated earlier.'

The cabin door closed behind her.

The atmosphere lifted palpably after she'd gone, and Draga was alone with the only person on board before whom she could behave with total frankness. Without a word she opened her tiny cabin safe, withdrew a bottle of triple-distilled quarl spirit, and poured herself and Relgo a measure in two small glasses. They drank for a moment in silence, then Draga asked, 'Any more news of the patrols?'

'No.'

'Perhaps the Royals are up to something new.' Relgo smiled grimly. 'Maybe it's those aliens Coroth reported.'

'I can't make sense of that. Nothing could have landed here as they claimed without our knowing it. I still think it was some sort of trick.'

'Unless it's the ghosts.'

It was Draga's turn to smile. 'Don't let Nevon hear you say that.'

'Seriously, there is something odd happening here. It's been building slowly, but over the last couple of lunars . . .'

He trailed off meaningfully.

'I know: a few thefts, some odd sightings, but proof of 71

nothing. I wonder if the Imperials have had the same?

Maybe I can learn something from Shallvar tomorrow.'

'You're still going ahead with the meeting?'

'We're stalemated anyway, so we might as well talk.

Anyway it's part of the so-called ceasefire.'

'Do you think it'll last?' Relgo asked.

'About as long as the others, while the negotiators back on the home worlds squabble over boundaries and infringements and the forces get back up to strength. But, everybody else in the system is supposed to be observing it, and I just follow orders. Besides, I'm not going to let him think our recent losses are troubling us. In a way, I hope he'll turn up boasting about having all our missing people in his camp. I'd rather that than worry about what else may have happened to them.'

There was no true night on Vortis. The sky blazed with too many moons and stars and thick cloud was still a rarity.

But, when both the looming Rhumon sun and the star cluster core were below the horizon, it became as dark as it could ever be.

In a deep crater in the rugged highlands, the shadows pooled like ink.

Through them silent figures moved bearing limp, heavy forms.

The ground had already been prepared.

Cold hands deposited their burdens. Piles of soil were scraped and pushed back into position and tamped down.

Then the figures left the crater to the shades once more.

Nine

nd so the Animus was killed by the Menoptera-built

‘Acell disruptor that Barbara bravely directed against its dark side, despite the waves of mental force pressing on her mind,' the Doctor recounted, adding dramatic gestures to emphasize his words.

Jamie, sitting at the Doctor's feet in the gloom of the slave-workers' hut, had been listening as spellbound as the rest to the story, which had even briefly driven his fears over Victoria to the back of his mind. He knew they had a while to wait before making their next move and he loved to hear tales of adventure. It was as though he was young again, huddled together with his friends in the candlelit croft, listening to Old Robbie recounting tales of mysterious far-flung lands. Old Robbie had been his highland village's greatest traveller, having taken ship when he was a boy and visited Africa and the Americas. The next most travelled man in the village at that time had been as far

as Carlisle. Of course, Jamie thought proudly, he himself had done a little better than either of them since then.

'Humans, Menoptera and Optera had all struggled together to triumph against the vile creature,' the Doctor concluded. 'With its power broken, the simple Zarbi and larvae grubs returned to their peaceful ways. Water absorbed by the Animus's planetwide web was released into the soil again. Diverted streams began to flow. With our TARDIS also released from the Animus's hold, I and my good friends Ian, Barbara and Vicki left to continue our travels once more.'

As the Doctor beamed and bowed, Jamie joined in 73

the soft patter of Menoptera applause, which entailed slapping their palms against their thighs. There were also a few Optera slaves present, who seemed to be the Menoptera's cousins. They were naturally wingless beings, resembling hunched upright caterpillars, with three pairs of short arms and huge compound eyes suggesting they were adapted to the dark. Their voices were harsh and hesitant, but they nevertheless added their hoarse cries eagerly to their fellows' chorus of approval, which greeted the end of the Doctor's tale.

'That was a grand adventure, Doctor,' Jamie complimented. 'I wish I could have been with you.'

'So you have truly returned to us, Doctor,' said Yostor. 'I had listened to the songs of old but never thought I would see this day. But you find Vortis once more oppressed, and we cannot yet say if our tale will have a happy ending as did yours.'

Yostor was the eldest of the Menoptera slaves. His wings were torn and dull, and like the rest pinioned together by two long strips of riveted metal, making it impossible for them to be spread. But, despite this, Jamie sensed a dignity about him that captivity had not diminished, and he felt an immediate sympathy for and even an affinity with the alien.

It was the resistance of the oppressed to the enemy on their home soil, and that was something Jamie understood only too well. Yostor had earlier told them the story of the Rhumon invasion, which had drawn many hisses from the other Menoptera, together with odd jabbing hand movements directed at the Rep prisoners who were gathered at the other end of the hut. Coroth, Jamie noted, had listened to the Doctor's story with obvious interest, even though the Doctor had been speaking in the native tongue. He wondered how much he had

understood - or believed.

'And now that you share our fate, Doctor,' Yostor continued, 'what are we to do?'

"Well, for a start, I rather thought we might all try escaping tonight,' the Doctor said mildly, then had to wave his hands urgency to still the reaction to his words.

'Not so loud, please,' he insisted. 'We don't want the guards on the wall to hear us.'

'Escape?' hissed Yostor. 'Is it truly possible?'

The Doctor smiled genially. 'I think it is.'

'Doctor,' Jamie asked, 'when you said all, did you mean them as well?' he nodded at the Republicans.

'Why not? They're prisoners too. And we're going to need Coroth to drive a vehicle for us, so we can get back to the cliff village where we lost Victoria as quickly as possible.

Besides' — he rubbed his hands together — 'the more the merrier. The more people the Imperial guards have to chase, the better chance we all have.'

'They are our enemies, Doctor,' Yostor said unhappily.

'The Republicans also take those of us who do not acknowledge their rule into slavery, though they use different words to describe it.'

'Suppose you make this the first step in showing them that you can be friends,' the Doctor suggested. 'There's nothing like shared adversity to bring people together.'

Yostor bowed his head for a moment.

'No, I suppose we should not deny them their chance of freedom as well. If only they will return to their own base and trouble us no more.'

'But do you have somewhere to go?' Jamie enquired.

Yostor spread his hands expressively.

'Where the flower forests are thickest, there we will be safe. Or perhaps some may shelter secretly in controlled villages and find tools to release our pinions. Not all who live there have gone over to the invaders. But, if you wish, I will help you in your search for your lost friend, Victoria.'

'Don't you want to return to your own home first?'

Yostor's head hung once more, his antennae sagging.

'My home is destroyed, my family and friends are dead or scattered. There is nowhere for me.'

'Then,' said the Doctor gently, 'we accept your kind offer.'

He beckoned Coroth over. The Republican approached them stiffly, looking distastefully at the Menoptera, who in turn edged away from him.

'What do you want?' he demanded. 'We're going to escape,' Jamie said boldly, 'and you've any sense you'll throw in with us.'

'What Jamie means,' the Doctor explained, 'is that if we help you and your men escape, we'd like you to take us back to where we left our friend in return. I assume you could drive an Imperial vehicle?'

'Of course,' Coroth replied mockingly, 'I would be delighted to transport you anywhere you desire. But perhaps you have overlooked a few small details. The locked door for instance?'

'Ah yes, an ultrasonic lock,' the Doctor said. 'They can't be picked or forced... at least, not in the conventional sense.'

He drew some short lengths of hollow reed from his pocket.

'These were growing close to where we were working,' he explained, producing a tiny penknife and beginning to white at the reed. 'With a little experimentation I think I can make a whistle which will duplicate the unlocking frequency.'

'But how can you know the correct pitch?'

'I heard it when they put us in here. It wasn't that much above the normal range,' the Doctor replied absently, becoming engrossed in the instrument he was shaping. 'I have a sonic emitter somewhere in the

TARDIS that could do this,' he muttered. 'I really must remember to carry it in future...'

Coroth grunted in grudging admiration. 'Ingenious. But then what about the energy fence? They placed the generators around this place when they locked us in. We can't get close to them without being stunned, and they're too sturdy to disable by throwing rocks from a distance, if that's what you're thinking.'

'Not at all. Jamie and I will take care of them. The fences work on a similar principle to your firearms, don't they?'

Coroth started, then allowed himself a rueful smile.

'I begin to understand . . . alien.'

'Precisely,' the Doctor beamed back. 'The sensor field is attuned to Rhumon and Menoptera bodies, but not Jamie's or mine. I don't think Father Modeenus and Lord 76

Shallvar have appreciated the implications of our test results yet, and I'm rather anxious that we should leave before they make the necessary modifications. Well, do you agree?'

'Of course, if you can give us half a chance. Perhaps we can find some weapons while we're —'

'No! Apart from the risk, there must be no bloodshed,' the Doctor stated adamantly. 'We shall all escape, Menoptera and Optera as well, without unnecessary violence, or not at all.'

For a moment it seemed that Coroth would argue, then he nodded.

'As you will. You are a strange one, alien; but at least you do not seem to hold to the corrupt Imperial philosophy, or their machine would have detected it.'

The Doctor frowned. 'Do you also believe an integral analyser can distinguish between abstract beliefs?'

Coroth looked surprised. 'Of course. We use similar technology to test the commitment of our own workers. In fact the original analyser design was a product of revolutionary collective ingenuity. But it only proves the inherent differences between our societies. That has been demonstrated beyond doubt. It is a scientific fact.'

'Is it really?' mused the Doctor thoughtfully. 'I wonder . .

.' He lapsed into an introspective silence. Jamie nudged him.

'Doctor! Can we get on with escaping and leave the puzzles for later?'

'What? Oh, yes. Right you are.'

He went over to the hut door, sat cross-legged before it, and blew experimentally into his reed pipe, as though running up an inaudible scale. Nothing happened. He trimmed a sliver off the pipe and tried again. This time there was a slight metallic click. With a satisfied smile he reached across and touched the door. It swung open half an inch.

Half an hour later, the door of the slave hut swung open far enough for two faces to peer out across the compound.

Lights glowed about the ship's ramps and the 77

guards' lean-tos beside the gateway, but otherwise all was, in darkness, lit only by the myriad unfading stars of Vortis and just one of its many moons.

'Why aren't there more lights about?' Jamie whispered into the Doctor's ear.

'I think they are having to conserve power,' the Doctor hissed back.

'What about the guards on the cliffs above?'

'They'll be looking outwards like the others, not in . . . I hope. Come on.'

They padded forward to the ring of fence generators.

Jamie felt a slight tingling as he touched them, but nothing more. Each unit was secured in place by a heavy screw-threaded ground pin, which came free after a little twisting.

With two units removed the Doctor waved encouragingly.

The prisoners poured silently from the hut and carefully passed through the gap in the invisible barrier as they had rehearsed. Keeping to the deepest shadows under the looming cliff, they worked their way along to where the line of vehicles had been parked for the night. Coroth and the surviving soldier from his squad slid along the battered side of an open-backed truck until they reached the forward cab.

Cautiously the door was tested. It was not locked. The two climbed inside, and for a minute there was only a faint scraping and snap of wires. Then Coroth leant out of the cab and waved the rest on. They clambered into the back, unrolling the bundles of nets and tarpaulinlike sheets that had been stacked there and burrowing beneath them. In moments the truck's living cargo was concealed. The almost silent motors purred into life, and Coroth set the vehicle rolling slowly forward in a wide arc so that it swung to face the main gates of the compound. There was no sense of urgency in the action, and the gate guards had no reason to suspect anything was amiss as the vehicle headed towards them. One stepped forward casually to ask why he hadn't been informed of any departures at this time of night, but his rifle was still slung and his manner merely curious.

Coroth accelerated suddenly, motors whining under the 78

sudden load, earth spurting from the tracks. The soldiers on the gate dived aside as the heavy vehicle plunged forward and smashed into layered panels of native wood. Bracing designed to resist impact from the opposite direction offered little impedance and the gates burst apart with a crash. The halftrack skidded over the debris, then swept away down the canyon into the night. Startled wall guards loosed a couple of high-energy lectrorifle bolts after it, but both missed.

Behind them floodlights flared and alarms rang as the base roused itself. But before the first sign of pursuit appeared, the hijacked vehicle had reached the edge of the cleared ground and disappeared into the forest.

Jamie had qualms about trusting Coroth, but the soldier kept his word.

Once they were well clear of the base they slowed briefly to allow groups of Menoptera and Republican soldiers to drop off the back of the transporter and scramble for the shelter of the forest, as agreed. Then Coroth continued on towards the cliff dwelling again. Those on foot had as good a chance as they did, Jamie reckoned, as any pursuit would inevitably follow the halftrack. Soon there were just Coroth, his surviving squadman Nurvo, Yostor, the Doctor and himself left, all huddled in the front cabin.

'Stripped down like this we should have the edge on speed,' Coroth commented, steering them along the track with the headlights dimmed to feeble glows. 'They've no reason to know we'd head this way as it's not the most direct route to the border. You can't tell how

fresh tracks are in this ground so they might even miss us altogether.'

'What about aircraft?' the Doctor exclaimed in sudden alarm.

Coroth laughed mirthlessly. 'We've managed to destroy just about all of our aircars in skirmishes since we've been on this miserable world. The Royals may have a few one-man flight packs left, but probably won't use them.' He glanced meaningfully at Yostor and said slowly, 'His kind brought down too many.'

"That is true,' Yostor replied calmly. 'Flight is our one advantage. Invaders must expect to be opposed by whatever means possible.'

'Shut up, wingman,' Nurvo said angrily.

"That'll be enough of that,' Jamie warned him.

The halftrack rolled onwards.

Shallvar paced about the empty slave hut. He bent down for a moment and picked up some shavings cut from a hollow reed, then walked back outside and stared at the places where the fence generators had been removed.

'This is the work of evil forces, my Lord,' Modeenus pronounced in doomladen tones. Unfortunately Shallvar was too tired and angry to temporize as he should have done.

'Nonsense! This was just the work of a sharp mind making the most of a natural advantage. A simple direct plan well executed. Not the work of the Reps or the natives alone. They all escaped together without attempting to take a fully armoured vehicle or gather any weapons. The Reps would have tried to do that and not taken the natives. The natives might have indulged in some sabotage given half a chance and wouldn't have worked with the Reps. No, the two strangers were responsible — the ones I foolishly thought were no threat. But it was our fault they had the chance in the first place.'

'Ours, my Lord?' Modeenus looked offended. You mean personally? Surely the sentries -'

'Ours. We both saw the analyser results, but didn't realize their significance. But the aliens certainly did. That one dressed in black especially. Maybe there was something in his story after all, but I was

too ready to dismiss it and him.

Never again. And you might be less free with your own judgements, and staff, in future. A little understanding in the beginning might have saved us this mess.'

Modeenus bristled, drawing himself erect.

'I am but the Hand of Omnimon. To criticize me is to criticize his holy and ineffable will!'

'Well perhaps you'd better pray for Omnimon to speak to you a little more clearly, unless this is part of his plan!'

Without another word Modeenus stomped off. Shallvar looked at his retreating back. I really shouldn't have said that, he thought, but sometimes Modeenus's over-righteous certainty cries out to be deflated. I'll have to apologize later.

Blame the lateness of the hour, or something.

'Paamas!' The lieutenant trotted over from the remains of the gate and saluted. 'Lord Captain?'

'Alert our native villages to be on the lookout for the prisoners. Rewards for information, penalties for giving them shelter, the usual thing. It's vital the two strangers don't get away. But they mustn't be harmed. I want to talk to them again.'

It took over an hour to reach the deserted Menoptera cliff village where they had left Victoria. When they finally rolled up to the pockmarked wall of rock, Jamie leapt down from the cabin in his impatience and ran towards the row of tunnel mouths. The Doctor descended more sedately, carrying a torch he'd found in the halftrack cab.

'Wait for me, Jamie. We've got to find out which tunnel she went down first.'

'This one, Doctor,' Jamie called back, picking something up from the sandy soil and holding it aloft. 'See, here's my dirk where I dropped it.' He wiped the blade clean and slipped it back into his sock. The Doctor turned to Coroth.

'Well, you've fulfilled your part of the bargain. I suppose you'll be wanting to get back home now.'

Coroth was also holding a torch, together with a heavy long-handled wrench from the vehicle's toolbox. Nurvo was hefting some sort of crowbar. Both looked determined.

'If you're going down there to look for your friend, we might as well search for our compeers at the same time,'

Coroth said simply. 'Security doesn't matter now . . . and it might be safer for all of us.'

The Doctor smiled.

'Thank you. We would be most grateful for any assistance.'

'Then you'd better take some sort of weapon yourself,'

Coroth suggested.

'No, I don't think so. I'm not terribly good with them really. Jamie usually takes care of that sort of thing.'

Coroth turned uncomfortably to Yostor, who had been standing patiently beside them.

'You'd better arm yourself too, wingman,' he suggested grudgingly. 'If you're still coming.'

'My name is Yostor,' the old Menoptera replied with dignity, 'and I have not changed my mind.' He strode over to one of the smaller enclosures laid out before the cliff, grasped one of the posts and worked it back and forth until it came free. It was a crystalline rock spar nearly three feet long with a sharp point at one end, and could be used either to club or stab. 'I am ready,' he said.

Jamie had returned to the group and eyed Yostor's new weapon with approval. 'Now that's a fair bludgeon you have there,' he exclaimed, and in a minute he had provided himself with a similar implement, which he swung about experimentally with obvious satisfaction. Coroth sighed, and he and Nurvo exchanged their toolbox weapons for more spars. Switching on their torches, they cautiously entered the tunnel down which Victoria had tumbled that morning and descended

the long curving ramp into the depths.

Yostor automatically took the lead, an assumption that even the two Rhumon did not dispute. He was the most familiar of them all with such places, and his large eyes gave him the keenest vision in the subterranean gloom.

They reached the bottom of the ramp and examined the scrabble of indistinct impressions on the sandy floor, trying to identify footprints.

'They went that way,' Jamie decided after a minute's study, pointing down the main tunnel with more hope than certainty. He drew in a breath to call out Victoria's name, but the Doctor stopped him.

'No, Jamie,' he said softly. 'Let's explore a little further first, before we let everybody know we're here.'

These levels were used by the Optera,' Yostor explained as they proceeded, 'but there should be no one here now.

The Rhumon cleared all the settlements in this region, save those few closest to their bases. Thus they have divided my people.'

Coroth had understood enough of this to give a dismissive snort, but made no further comment. Jamie merely said,

'They behave like a proper bunch of Sassenachs, don't they?'

which brought a wry smile to the Doctor's lips, even if it baffled the others.

They tramped on down the tunnel, peering hopefully into side passages as they went. The debris of evacuation remained in the shape of a few scraps and some simple pieces of furniture, but there was no sign of Victoria or the two Republican soldiers. Then ahead their torchlight gleamed off a film of water that ran down one wall, seeping out of some natural fissure in the rock. Jamie sprang forward eagerly to examine the damp sand below it, which for the first time showed footmarks clearly.

'That's Victoria's shoe, right enough,' he said. 'And she was running here by the looks of it.'

'And there's a Republic-issue bootprint beside it,' Coroth confirmed.

'They certainly came this far.'

The Doctor swung his torch beam to one side.

'But what's this?'

It was a broad, oval print some eighteen inches long, deeper in the centre than the edges, which were not sharp.

Its surface was criss-crossed by a series of ribs, like the pattern of a wire mesh.

'That's like no footmark I've ever seen, ours or the Imperials',' Coroth admitted simply.

'Here's another one,' the Doctor said.

In silence they followed the tracks. Before the sand dried out once more, they saw that the unknown track overlapped the prints of Victoria and the soldier.

'If they are the marks of feet,' hissed Yostor, 'then they are made by no animal of Vortis.'

Jamie felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise, and gripped his rock spar more tightly. It was as they all stood in silence digesting the significance of Yostor's remark, that they heard a whisper of sound from the darkness around them, as though something soft had scraped along a stone wall. Coroth and the Doctor swung their torches about, stabbing the beams up and down the passage and into the mouths of the archways that lined it.

'There!' Yostor exclaimed, pointing.

The torches swung round in time to catch some grey form as it withdrew from the light into the shadows. Then there was a shuffling from the other direction. The beams darted about but found nothing. Then came a soft, rustling footfall that got closer and closer.

'They're all around us!' Jamie said.

'But what are they?' Coroth demanded.

The answer loomed suddenly out of the darkness of the main tunnel.

It was a monstrous, dull, grey form almost eight feet tall.

From its long torso sprouted two pairs of arms as sinuous as elephants' trunks, each tapering to a curious pointed stub. Its head was no more than a mound rising from the upper pair of shoulders, without any distinct neck. It had no features except for a single, broad, dark pucker in the centre of an otherwise blank face. Stocky legs, as apparently jointless as its arms, ended in great oval foot pads. Its skin, if that was what it was, resembled matted, coarse, grey wool interwoven with loose patches and scraps, giving the thing an odd, slightly shaggy appearance.

As they backed away Jamie heard the Doctor clear his throat.

'Hallo,' he called out reassuringly. 'We don't mean any harm.'

'I don't think it's worried about us hurting it, Doctor,'

Jamie said, grasping his spar more tightly.

'We were just. . . er, looking around,' the Doctor continued desperately. 'We'll go if you like . . .'

There was no response from the creature, except that 84

both its pairs of arms suddenly stretched out before it. Their tapering stubs split open and spread wide, forming three long chisel-like fingers that flexed and writhed menacingly like blind worms.

'I think possibly we should consider running at this point,'

the Doctor said.

They spun round.

Four more of the grey monsters emerged from archways on either side of them.

'Quick! Before we're trapped!' Jamie shouted, and with a ringing battle cry charged at the gap between the advancing creatures that led back up the tunnel, swinging his rock club at the rubbery arms writhing towards them. The others followed his lead.

There was a flurry of desperate blows as they fought their way through. Jamie flung himself at one creature with its arms spread wide as though about to enfold him in some ghastly embrace, and plunged his sharp spar into its chest with all his strength. Its body felt

curiously spongy and it was like stabbing through twists and coils of fine wire. As he drove the blow home the sides of his hands brushed the thing's matted skin. Instantly he jerked away in pain, his flesh burning as though he had pushed his hand into a clump of virulent stinging nettles. The thing staggered backward, almost casually grasped the protruding haft of the rock spike with one hand, pulled it free and cast it aside in one easy movement. The deep hole in its chest gaped raggedly with no sign of blood in any form. Then the creature came at him again and Jamie backed frantically away. But they were past the creatures now and the way to the surface was clear —

There was a scream of pain and utter terror.

Jamie spun about to see Nurvo writhing in the grasp of one of the monsters, his feet kicking desperately as he was lifted clear of the ground. Even as Coroth started back towards him the creature swung the soldier like a rag doll against the tunnel wall. There was a sickening crack, and he hung limp and still, his head lolling at a twisted, unnatural angle.

Coroth stood frozen in horror, then his ears furled back and he raised his makeshift club as though he intended to continue the fight and avenge his comrade. The Doctor grabbed his arm.

'No! He's dead. We've got to save ourselves now!'

For a moment Jamie thought they would have to drag Coroth away by force, but the sense of the Doctor’s words must have struck home because he turned and ran with them as they dashed back up the tunnel. At their heels four grey creatures followed in silent, shambling but relentless pursuit. Throughout the brief skirmish they had not made a single sound beyond the peculiar whispering rustle of the footfalls.

'Doctor!' Jamie exclaimed in sudden horror. 'What about Victoria? If those things have got her . . .'

'No, Jamie,' the Doctor gasped as he ran. 'Think. If the worst has happened already there's nothing we can do. If she's managed to evade those creatures so far. . . our being here will only increase the chances of her being found.

Besides . . . they're too strong. We'll need help to fight them.'

'You'll get it,' panted Coroth. 'We'll clean those abominations out, I promise you!'

They reached the ramp to the surface only a few yards ahead of the creatures and scrambled up it. Looking back as they climbed Jamie saw that their pursuers had stopped at the base of the ramp for some reason.

'The beasties are holding back,' he said with relief, then cursed: 'No! Here they come again.' As though having resolved some unknown deliberation of their own, the grey creatures were plodding after them once more.

They burst out into the perpetual twilight of Vortis and dashed for the halftrack. A second moon had risen while they had been below, and a gathering glow on the horizon signalled the imminent rise of the distant Rhumon sun. As they reached the cab and tore open the doors the grey creatures shambled out of the tunnel mouth and started towards them, twin pairs of weaving arms spread wide. The four of them piled into the cabin,

Jamie in the front beside Coroth, the Doctor and Yostor in the rear seats. Coroth threw the switch to power the engines, his thin mouth drawn back in a mirthless grin, his long chin thrust out determinedly. Dirt spurted from under the tracks as the vehicle leapt forward, swinging about and driving straight at the creatures. They made no attempt to move aside, but merely spread their arms wider.

'No!' shouted the Doctor, but it was too late.

The weaving arms disappeared from view with dull multiple thuds. Jamie glimpsed grey forms bowling over to either side of them as they were brushed aside, while a slight bump told of at least one more that had gone under the tracks. Coroth accelerated away and they plunged into the forest. His face set in an expression of grim satisfaction over seething anger.

'We are heading for the Republic base,' he said in a tone that brooked no dissent. 'You will make statements confirming what has happened. Captain-Commander Draga will learn of these things. They'll be hunted down, every last one -'

Before their eyes a sinuous grey arm lashed upward and flopped across the outside of the narrow armoured windscreen with a heavy

smack, its long fingers scrabbling for a hold. A second arm followed and the dome of a head appeared, its single pit-like orifice gaping blankly at them as the thing hauled itself up over the angled wedge of the halftrack's prow. Coroth snarled and twisted the steering yoke. They veered off the track and raced towards a low spreading flower tree.

The tree disintegrated as the vehicle smashed through it.

Branches tore at the grey creature and whipped across the windows, smearing them with a sticky mix of sap and dust.

But the creature still clung fast, clawing at the windscreen frame and leaving muddy trails on the glass. Automatic wipers came on, beating against the thing's arms, jamming and whirring futilely. Coroth ducked his head from side to side, temporarily unsighted. The halftrack careered through the forest, flattening the

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thinning trees before surging into the open. A straggling thicket of scrub lay ahead. The Doctor's eyes widened,

'Stop!'

It was too late.

They burst through the flimsy growths and there was only sky beyond. The nose of the halftrack tilted suddenly downwards. The grey creature seemed to float free and slithered up the windscreen. Motors raced as tracks and wheels spun in empty air. Then they toppled over the edge of the sheer cliff and plunged into the wooded valley below.

88

Ten

ryl's tutorial was on third-level dextrobrocation,

‘Owhich almost everybody in the cycle group found intensely tedious. But it had to be mastered to the specified standard before they could begin practising differential trialphid transformation, which they were all looking forward to with far more enthusiasm. Oryl was giving a practical demonstration. (Information): 'Waveform modulation now occurring in underlying drell layers at third intensity level.' (Specific detail): 'Range three point eight to five point two on standard scale as

brocation initiated. Note modulation effect.'

They dutifully strained their senses to detect the change, but it was on the edge of their current range and they could not be certain of the results. Twel, however, clearly attempting to be the model student, boldly announced, (Confirmation): 'Modulation detected within indicated parameters.'

Oryl looked pleased. (Approval): 'Group observe Twel success. Practise, repeat, emulate.'

Bris and Ilex exchanged rapid comments in basic speech on a personal band.

'Twel attempting to impress Oryl. Suspect ulterior motive. Beware.'

'Agreed. Suggest selves employ additional caution.

Propose delay project return.'

'Possible strategy alternative: employ circuitous vector to project entrance, maintain vigilance. Self declare Twel will not delay work —'

(Alert/attention): 'Bris, Ilex.' Oryl's call cut through their conversation and they felt their tutor's penetrating 89

gaze upon them, forcing them hastily to close their personal band and assume attentive attitudes.

(Polite reminder): 'Demonstration progressing Bris, Ilex, attention required, assuming private affairs permit.'

(undertone sarcasm implied)

Education resumed its apparently interminable course.

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Eleven

amie groaned. He ached all over, particularly his right Jshould

er. He tasted blood and bile in his mouth. For a moment he could not remember where he was, but somebody seemed to be calling his name from a long way off. Then it came back to him.

The grey beast. Driving over the cliff. Falling . . . He tried to sit

upright suddenly and regretted it, clutching his spinning head.

'Take it easy, Jamie,' the Doctor's voice said reassuringly

'You've only been unconscious for a couple of minutes, but whatever you do, don't make any sudden moves.' Jamie blinked his eyes open.

He was still in the cabin of the halftrack, but the floor was now a wall, with the seat backs hanging above his head. He was wedged into the footspace under the control panel.

Somehow the whole vehicle was standing on its nose. The faces of the Doctor and Yostor loomed anxiously over him.

The light filtering through the narrow windows was strangely dim, and, for some reason, green-tinted. As he gathered his senses he realized a figure was slumped over the steering yoke. He was unnaturally still.

'Coroth?'

'I'm afraid the poor fellow is dead,' the Doctor said regretfully. 'His head must have struck the controls with frightful force when we landed.'

Jamie felt an unexpected pang of sorrow. From captor and prisoner they had over a few hours become, if only briefly, comrades in arms. The soldier had not lacked 91

courage, and he had kept his word. He would miss him Then he allowed the necessity of the moment to reassert itself.

'What happened?' He tried to move again and felt suddenly nauseous. Was it his imagination, or did the whole vehicle just sway slightly?

'We seem to be in some sort of tree,' the Doctor said. 'A very large tree with a lot of bushy and resilient branches, fortunately for us. We landed right in the middle of it and it broke our fall. The only problem is getting out of here and down to the ground without disturbing the balance, if you're up to it, I think we ought to try.'

Moving awkwardly in the confined space, Jamie got to his feet. Foliage showed through every window, and broken stubs of branches protruded through the forward panels, which had shattered into peculiar coin-sized hexagonal fragments. He suddenly shivered. "What about the beast?'

The Doctor pointed through the shattered glass to a branch a few feet beyond the cabin. A sinuous grey arm| hung over it, terminating in a ragged tear where the shoulder should have been. To Jamie's horror, its three long fingers still twitched and clenched spasmodically.

'Torn to shreds when we hit the tree. Not a pretty sight, is it?' the Doctor sympathized. 'But it demonstrates what peculiar creatures they are. They can't have a central nervous system, or any circulation or even specialized organs for that matter —'

'Later, Doctor,' Jamie insisted, turning away from the gruesome remains. 'Let's get down from here first.'

There was a hatch in the rear of the cabin, which allowed access to the open flatbed section. After several heaves they managed to unlatch it and throw it open. One by one they cautiously climbed out until they stood precariously on the outside of the rear cabin bulkhead, with the bed of the truck rearing like a wall beside them. Yostor stretched and shook out his pinioned wings as he looked about him, moving with a sure-footed grace Jamie envied.

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It seemed as though they were at the bottom of a broad well of green foliage, torn blossoms and the twisted remains of shattered branches, with only a small section of open sky right above them. He took a cautious step towards the side of the truck to search for the best way to climb down, and suddenly felt dizzy again. Maybe he was rushing things. He tried breathing deeply to clear his head and noticed there was a heavy, sweet scent in the air. It was not unpleasant, but rather cloying. He took another step and his foot skidded in something so that he almost fell. Amid the debris of torn leaves were scattered purplish berries or fruits, about the size of his fist. They had been broken by the crash and were oozing a dark syrup across the metal bulkhead plates.

Several more bunches of the fruit hung from the branches around them, dripping globules of pulp - almost as though they were bleeding. He felt dizzy again and sank to his knees.

'Doctor ... I don't feel too . . .'

'Somlos berries!' Yostor cried in alarm. 'We must get away now.'

'What is it?' the Doctor demanded. His voice sounded very distant to Jamie.

'A tree parasite . . . the fruit of sleep . . . quickly . . .'

Jamie had a last fading image of the Doctor and Yostor coughing and sinking to their knees, before he himself pitched forward into silent darkness.

Nallia would have allowed the Earth woman to rest longer after her experiences of the previous day, but she heard restless sounds coming from the curtained alcove that had been assigned to her, and peered within anxiously.

Victoria was sitting up in a tangle of sleeping furs, rubbing her eyes.

'Are you well?' Nallia asked. 'You made odd noises.'

'Oh . . . no, it was just a dream. It was about falling. I was

. . . frightened.'

'You fear falling?' Nallia asked delicately. 'Is this because you have no wings?'

'Well, yes. I suppose it might be,' Victoria admitted, then suddenly smiled. 'Of course, ***you*** cannot be afraid of heights.'

How terrible to be born so crippled, Nallia thought. Never to know the freedom of flight. The Menopten elders speculated that it was this lack that contributed to the Rhumon's aggressiveness. But clearly there was more to the matter than that. Victoria seemed not to regret the misfortune, so presumably others could feel the same. It was most confusing.

While she pondered, Victoria had risen and was pulling on her complicated outer garments. She had been sleeping in a thin tube of fabric that revealed most of her legs and arms. Nallia saw her unnaturally pale, soft carapace - skin, it was called - and even the disconcerting movements of her odd internal skeleton underneath it. And her back was without even a trace of wing roots. It was uncomfortably like watching an upright, walking noctor grub. She tried to put the image from her mind.

'You use artificial outer teguments. . . clothes? like the Rhumon,' she asked. 'Is this for protection, because your own skins are so soft?'

'Yes, partly. And to keep warm, and for decency's sake.'

'Decency?'

Much to her surprise the alien woman's skin about her cheeks coloured, and, as far as she could interpret the set of her odd features, she seemed discomforted. Her small mobile eyes now shied away from her.

'Oh my, I didn't think. You seem properly covered . . . but you never wear clothes.'

'We have no need.'

'So you go around . . . bare all the time.' 'I suppose we do.

What of it?' 'Nothing.' Victoria finished dressing quickly.

'Then I will show you where you can eat,' said Nallia.

Shallvar finished his breakfast and Cansonn entered to clear away the tray.

'That was almost as good as old, Cansonn,' he complimented. 'Where did you find that preserve? I thought we had none left.'

Cansonn allowed himself a slight smile of satisfaction.

'Native fruits, my Lord; only those approved by the surgeon, of course. I am pleased you liked them. I have been experimenting for some months, with the help of the ship's cook, after it became clear our stay here might be . . .

protracted.'

'Well done, Cansonn. Pass my compliments to the cook as well. You may have to find more compatible foods unless we can build a commercial synthesizer. Otherwise we'll all be on a native diet and supplements before long.' He dutifully swallowed the Imperial Service standard mineral and vitamin pills that Cansonn had placed as usual in their tiny cup.

'I trust the eventuality will not arise, my Lord,' Cansonn replied with feeling, clearing away the tray. 'Will you still be requiring your full dress uniform today, my Lord?'

'Certainly. I've no intention of changing my plans just because a few slaves have escaped. Wouldn't do to let the Reps know about it earlier than they must.'

'Of course not, my Lord. I'll lay out the necessary garments immediately'

It was the unexpected sound of voices raised in laughter that attracted Victoria's attention as they left the communal dining hall. Nallia understood. There was little enough cause for jollity at such time, and even less in a clandestine base. She led Victoria to the big cavern so that she would learn its cause.

It was even loftier than the cavern that formed the hub for all the main base tunnels. Around its walls were a few plants and small trees that could survive underground, all carefully tended. But most of the space had been left clear for a special purpose. Half a dozen young Menoptera, not long out of the pupa, were learning to fly. Below them adults, mainly females, watched on, calling out words of 95

encouragement and occasionally laughing with delight when a youngster mastered another facet of the skill.

Victoria watched their efforts with an unmistakable expression of growing wonder and delight, as they wheeled and banked about, occasionally chasing each other in games of touch and fly.

'Why, they're just like Earth children at play,' she exclaimed after some moments.

'It is play to them, yes,' Nallia agreed, 'but with a serious purpose. They are refugees from Rhumon-controlled villages. Many are orphans, or are fleeing with the families after being condemned under the invaders' laws. The children must be able to fly strongly before they make the journey to the free lands.'

'Is it far?'

'Not exceedingly so, but the way must be traversed as rapidly as possible. The Rhumon only control the stretch of the highlands directly, but their power extended beyond any land borders, as we found to our cost in the early days after the landings. An army was raised to drive them out, but despite their spacecraft being crippled their heaviest beams cut us down and missiles destroyed cities and towns in a great circle about them. Soon this part of Vortis was abandoned, save for the invaders and the tightly controlled tribute

villages.'

'And yourselves,' Victoria prompted.

'This base was established in great secrecy in the empty zone between the Rhumon factions to spy on them and help refugees, as you have seen. We have not given up the struggle. Elsewhere on Vortis, factories are building weapons. We have learnt from our mistakes. Next time we shall have the power to throw the invaders off our world.'

'When?'

'Soon . . . perhaps.'

Leaving the young to their flying lessons, they returned to the bustle of the main cavern. As they passed the archway leading to the cages, they heard Annolos and Torth arguing again.

'Goodness,' exclaimed Victoria, flushing at their words,

'Do they never stop?' Nallia bowed her head sadly.

'Such sustained anger is beyond our understanding. They may have cause to hate each other for some past wrong, but we have done nothing to them. Yet they despise us even more, if that were possible.'

'But why? I do not understand.' They walked on a little way until they found a mossy seat on a rock ledge.

'We can only guess their reasons,' Nallia continued.

'Perhaps because their coming divided us they think we are all weak and easily swayed and therefore untrustworthy.

They are also proud of their technology and think us foolish because we do not employ more. We built spacecraft many thousand risings ago to settle the moons during the war against the Animus, but gave them up when they were no longer needed. Vortis is enough for us. Our natures simply differ from theirs. We do not automatically like each other as individuals, but we seem to cooperate for mutual benefit most of the time. And in return we work with the Optera, and care for and guide the Zarbi who sometimes serve us.

Indeed, we could hardly believe there was any other way until the

Rhumon arrived. And then there is religion.'

'Yes?'

'The Republicans have no belief in matters beyond the material world, while the Imperials tell us our Gods of Light are but false and confused images of their own god and force us to change our ways. So we offend both. Each idea has influenced a few of our people, yet neither seem to understand that the Gods of Light are real. We do not worship phantoms or wishful ideas of what might be. They are our Gods alone. We do not expect the Rhumon to recognize them, but why should they deny us the right?'

Victoria had looked as though she badly wanted to speak and Nallia paused to let her. Instead Victoria shook her head as though confused.

'I'm sorry. I was going to say something about religion and what I was taught when I was young. But then I 97

thought of the Rhumon and what you had said, and then about missionaries going to foreign countries on my world .

. . and I'm not so sure now.'

'Mi-shon-aries. What are they?'

'It doesn't matter now. I've just seen something I took for granted from another point of view, I suppose. I think I understand how the Doctor looks at things a little better now. Visiting other worlds is wonderful but you risk losing your certainties. You must be strong enough to adapt and try to understand. If you're not. . .'

'Yes?'

'Then I think you behave like the Rhumon. All they can see are differences.'

Nallia sagged, and hung her head sadly.

'Unfortunately there truly are differences between them, and in that lies their strength, which in turn divides us. We cannot deny that their philosophies and beliefs alter them in measurable ways. It is built into their testing machines, their weapons and defensive barriers. Perhaps it is not surprising they can react to us, but they also prevent the passage of their respective enemies, however disguised. Our people see this and say perhaps there is power and truth in their words.

Sometimes... I even have doubts myself.'

Victoria's expression had become very distant, but now she shook herself and said firmly, 'No, Nallia. You must not give up on what you honestly believe in. I'm sure that's what the Doctor would tell you if he were here. But now... can you tell me more about these machines and barriers of the Rhumon's? Because I think I've had an idea.'

The sun was halfway to its zenith in the purple sky of Vortis when Draga's transporter arrived at the meeting place. It was a shallow, bleak little crater in the buffer zone, that permitted each side to feel secure but not trapped. She was punctual, but Shallvar's vehicle did not arrive for another quarter, as usual. Draga made no complaint. She allowed him his tardiness, which she knew was deliberate. Nevon had advised reciprocation in kind,

but then matters would have escalated until they never met at all. Draga had persuaded her instead to highlight it as a further example of Imperial laxity.

With rigid correctness two flags were erected in the middle of the crater. The Imperial gold and purple coat of arms faced the Republicans' red clasped hands on a green field. The tip of the Republican flagpole was always in fact half a hand higher than the Imperial, but Shallvar never made any mention of it, allowing Draga her little victory in turn. Between the flags were two sets of chairs and a table sheltered by a simple, open-sided awning. Soldiers took up their respective positions around the crater wall, facing their equal and numerically opposite numbers on the other side.

After ceremonially removing their personal weapons, Draga and Shallvar, with two aides apiece, approached the conference table and exchanged salutes. Draga restrained her usual smile at the gaudy finery of Shallvar's uniform, its sash pinned with badges of his rank and the arms of his house.

Father Modeenus made his expected appearance, striding briskly up to the table, his trailing robes raising puffs of dust, the gems in his staff glittering.

'May the grace of Omnimon be upon your deliberations, and his hand guide your thoughts and deeds.' His eyes flickered distastefully across the Republican contingent.

'May those who have fallen from the light find it once more and return to the path of truth.'

At least Nevon isn't here this time to start arguing with the old fool, Draga thought with relief, as the Republicans studiously ignored him.

'Thank you for your blessing, Father,' Shallvar said formally. 'Your words will be entered into the transcript of the meeting, and I'm sure your appeal will bring forth its rightful harvest in due course.' Was there a hint of sarcasm there? Draga wondered. 'Now if you will be kind enough to withdraw,' Shallvar continued smoothly, 'we shall proceed in the usual manner.'

The churchman stalked away to what Draga always 99

thought of as his neutral corner - if a circular crater could be said to have corners - which was the empty ground between the two sides. Here he paced about, occasionally calling out to the Republicans to repent and return to the light, alternating with curses and assurances that they were already doomed to a miserable afterlife anyway. Everybody did their best to ignore him; indeed, she suspected that even some of the Imperial soldiers found him slightly embarrassing.

At the simple conference table they simultaneously removed their caps and helmets, baring their crests in the age-old gesture of honesty and openness, and took their seats. Actually there was no great tension. The proceedings had become a sort of formalized game, almost a ritual. As long as they were sensible and followed the rules nothing serious would happen. Certainly, neither side was likely to break the conference truce. Draga knew Relgo was back in the ***Liberation Day's*** control room with missiles zeroed on Shallvar's base, as Shallvar's shipmaster in the ***Royalist*** was no doubt on hers. So a balance was maintained, as it was all over the system. It was amazing how people learnt to live under the threat of total annihilation.

It was Draga's turn to open the proceedings.

'I must protest about further buffer zone violations. The first in sector seven yesterday timed at approximately eleven point twenty. We believe lethal fire was exchanged and suspect some of our soldiers may have been taken prisoner. A second attack was made on a patrol sent to investigate the first incident at approximately thirteen point forty-five while it was returning to base and almost within our exclusion zone. They were also transporting two unidentified native subjects for questioning and these are also missing. If any of our

soldiers from either incident are your prisoners, we demand their immediate repatriation.'

They would not get it, of course. Prisoners were exchanged only after a suitable term, when their numbers got too great for either side to be comfortable with. Worked hard and given the minimum permissible 100

rations, they generally needed nursing back to full health, so absorbing even more time and attention.

Shallvar produced a printout which he handed over.

'That is a list of all Republican prisoners in our care as of midnight local time last night. On behalf of his Majesty's government I must also demand any details concerning the whereabouts of our patrol under the command of Squadleader Garrond, who went missing before noon, yesterday.'

'Were they also inside the buffer zone?' Draga asked.

'I cannot confirm their exact whereabouts,' Shallvar responded smoothly. 'It is possible they may have, inadvertently, strayed over the border into the zone, but, due to frequent Republican disputes over its precise dimensions and boundaries, it is sometimes hard to know where those borders are.'

Draga let the jibe go and handed over a list of Imperial prisoners. There was a slight pause while their aides checked each list, then one whispered in Draga's ear.

'It appears,' Draga said aloud, 'that you hold two men of our second patrol but none of the first.'

'You claim to hold none of our first patrol either.'

'We do not.'

There was another silence as each studied the countenance of the other for any sign of dissembling. But neither gave anything away.

'Perhaps,' Shallvar suggested carefully, 'some natural hazard is responsible for their mutual delay in returning to their respective bases.' Draga sensed an undercurrent to his words, but could not guess its purpose.

'Possibly,' she conceded with equal caution. 'But whatever the reason, if any Republican soldier should fall into your hands I insist they be treated according to the agreed terms.'

'As do I on behalf of any Imperial personnel.'

Draga's eyes met Shallvar's and shared a moment of understanding.

'I request,' Draga said formally, 'a temporary adjourn-ment. I wish to confer with Lord Shallvar captain to captain, off the record.'

Shallvar made a show of grudging acquiescence.

'I suppose it is your right, Captain Draga. Very well.'

The recorders were switched off. Draga and Shallvar, leaving their aides to stare stonily at their counterparts across the table, walked a little way from the shelter.

Modeenus watched them intently but kept his distance.

'You really know nothing about the lost patrol?' Draga asked simply, when they were out of earshot.

'Nothing. Ours also vanished without trace. We've been trying to make as little of it as possible for obvious reasons.

You haven't been hiding bodies again I suppose?'

'I told you last time, we were not responsible. In fact we've lost a few people ourselves recently. It's probably the native resistance getting bolder.'

'Can't you keep your wingmen under control?'

'How do you know it's not yours?'

'It may be,' Shallvar agreed. 'Or they might be from outside the territory altogether. Or . . .'

'Well?'

'Those two natives you held briefly yesterday.' 'So you've got them now?'

'I have talked to them,' Shallvar admitted carefully. 'They claim to be alien travellers and not natives at all.'

'So we understood. It seems impossible.' She looked at him narrowly. 'But what do you think?'

'Their tests were unusual. I'm still considering their story.

But they did talk of some . . . peculiar occurrences in the buffer zone. Something we can't put a name to may have taken a friend of the aliens and, perhaps, a couple of your people yesterday. Possibly you have experienced something similar.'

'Certain incidents have been noted,' Draga said carefully.

'It's probably all down to some native predator or natural phenomena we haven't come across yet.'

'Probably. Still, you might keep an eye out for similar occurrences and share the information. No sense in us suspecting each other falsely and overreacting, is there?'

'Of course not. When we finally destroy you I want it to be for all the right reasons.'

'As do we,' replied Shallvar mildly.

They stood in silence for a moment, then he asked, 'How's your food situation? We've just made some delicious preserves out of native fruits. Would you like a jar — if that's not too decadent for you?'

'Nevon would suspect it was poisoned and want it all analysed, but the thought is appreciated. The rations are becoming a little monotonous. If this goes on we'll both be eating like natives soon.'

Shallvar sighed. 'And now back to the table before our respective guards get too anxious. I've got to take you to task for spreading more of your malicious propaganda about the situation here across the system.'

'How remarkable. I've got to do the same to you.'

After a year they both knew the rules of the game well.

Nevon-two also knew the game well. Its first rule was to trust nobody.

Which was why, as she sat in her stark cabin on board the *Liberation Day,* she monitored the conversation between Draga and Shallvar via a microtransmitter she had concealed in the collar of Draga's jacket during an inspection of the laundry room a few days before. And now, as she listened, her thin hands clenched in anger. Such casual fraternization with the Imperials was inexcusable.

Draga had previously claimed these private talks with Shallvar were a useful source of information because he relaxed his guard. But it was clear her manner was becoming dangerously familiar. They were practically conspiring to fuel this dangerous nonsense about 'ghosts'.

The recording of this conversation alone was enough to have Draga relieved of command to face a military enquiry and a sentence in a corrective facility ... if only circumstances were different. If only Relgo did not exhibit so many of the same traits as Draga. She could hardly attempt to replace Draga with him. He was unreliable. And yet, somehow, remained very popular with the crew.

Nevon could not imagine what it was like to be popular.

Strong emotions and allowing people close to her, in either sense, were not concepts she thought she could ever understand, except in the abstract. There seemed to be so much risk involved in them. She found rules and order safer, and the revolution provided plenty of those. It was already worked out for you. All it took was obedience and you progressed smoothly, and Nevon found obedience easy.

It was simply a decision to follow a particular set of instructions unquestioningly. There were always opportunities for people like her.

But what had gone wrong? This assignment had seemed such an opportunity, but instead had become a dead end.

Even the planet was conspiring against her. No, that was a foolish thought. The inhabitants lacked maturity, that was all. Collective rational principles were obviously the universal norm - the inevitable consequence of the evolutionary process. A relative handful of the natives had seen that and were making some progress at applying the principles to the rest of their kind, but it was slow work. A degree of imposed order was still necessary for their ultimate good.

Of course the outcome was inevitable, but how long would the process take? The handbook of Morale and Discipline practice gave no clue in

these circumstances, and the handbook contained the rules for everything!

Almost everything.

She shook herself. That was regressive thinking.

She needed a distraction: a little sensibly rationed pleasure. No, it wasn't ***really*** pleasure. She would be quite unfit for her post if it actually gave her pleasure. ***Stimulus,***

that was it. That was all it was.

She checked that her cabin door was locked, went over to her safe, opened it and carefully took out a small box. For a moment she set it on the table before her and stared at it, feeling the glow begin. Nervously she turned the official photographs of the Chief Coordinator and her department head so that they faced the wall. Of course they were inanimate things, but their unblinking gaze troubled her, as though she was doing something improper.

Which she wasn't, of course.

She pulled off her gloves, and with a trembling hand unlocked the box. She ran her fingers through the contents and shuddered as the pleasure - no, the ***stimulus -*** rose within her. And with it for the first time came an irrational but very reassuring feeling that everything was going to work out perfectly in the end.

'What's the time?' Torth asked moodily.

'Just gone hour nineteen,' Annolos replied automatically.

It was perhaps the most innocuous exchange imaginable, he realized. He hadn't made any remark about Torth's Republican-made watch failing, or shown off his own expensive chronometer, which had been a graduation present from Uncle Harrlon. They hadn't begun shouting or arguing again. They had respectively made and responded to an ordinary request, that was all. But for a Rep and a Royal in close proximity that was practically momentous.

Hours of arguing had taken their toll. There had been no revelation, no joining of hearts and minds. The fundamental distrust was still there, but they had simply grown tired of repeating the usual

accusations without discernible purpose.

They were fellow captives, fighting time and uncertainty together, agreeing on only one thing.

The natives were beginning to frighten them.

They'd each been taken to the laboratory, just as the alien girl had been taken the day before, except that she hadn't come back. The experience actually hadn't been worse than basic training, when everybody learnt what stun fire felt like, and during combat exercises when the stun intensity was raised over the pain threshold to encourage clumsy soldiers to keep their heads down. Annolos had felt sick with relief when he realized that was all they wanted him for, and the knot in his guts unwound. But it had been unsettling to see wingmen handling sophisticated equipment like that. Some of it was obviously of Rhumon manufacture and probably

stolen, but the rest was clearly native designed and built.

That was wrong. These were primitives living in trees and caves. How could they make such things? Of course, both Rhumon forces between them held only a fraction of the planet. Perhaps this was a backwoods region, and the natives had manufacturing centres elsewhere, probably underground, so concealing them from the planetary survey they had made before landing. He must warn his commander about what they were up to, and about this base, which had to house a couple of hundred natives and their creatures at least. But how?

As he brooded, a native female entered the small cave with a tray of food. Annolos noticed that her wings were just ragged stumps. Keeping well clear of the bars she placed wooden platters of fresh food where they could reach them, and gathered in the remains of the earlier meal. Half the food was untouched. She said haltingly in broken Rhumon, 'You not eat all. Why?'

'Bring us some proper food, girl,' Torth growled at her.

'We can't eat your native muck.'

'It is all edible for you,' she piped back. 'You eat to stay healthy.'

'For what?' Annolos cut in angrily. 'More experiments?'

'For after. Do you not want go home?' Torth stared at her in obvious astonishment and disbelief.

'Are we really supposed to believe you'd let us go?'

'Of course. We not like you,' she said simply, and walked lightly out.

'Do you think she was telling the truth?' Annolos asked.

Torth laughed. 'Want to believe in a soft voice, even if it's a wingwoman's? Think she was pretty, maybe? After much longer on this planet even the ***native*** women will start looking good.' There was an undertone of frustration in his words.

'I thought you Reps were all right there. You've got women soldiers haven't you?'

Yeah, but they're choosy, and you can't cross too many ranks. Besides, there's not enough of them.'

Not enough, thought Annolos. The image of the Rep soldier he'd shot came back. One fewer, thanks to him. And what had it all been for, anyway?

Nallia and Krestus were waiting outside the prisoners' cave for the wingless Menoptera woman. They walked a few steps to an alcove where she put down the tray, reached up and tugged at her antennae. The whole of her furred headpiece, nose and bulging compound eyes came away to reveal Victoria's slightly flushed face underneath.

'I fooled them, didn't I?' she said excitedly.

'Yes, Victoria of Earth, you did,' Krestus agreed. 'I had not realized humans could mimic Menoptera voices so well.'

You were most convincing,' Nallia agreed, inspecting Victoria's disguise again.

Her mouth, cheeks and neck had been painted in bold slashes of black and white to resemble Menoptera facial markings. Wire, dark fabric and the fine fur from the husks of a seed pod formed the rest of her costume, which had taken them most of the day to make.

'I believe you can deceive the Rhumon unless they examine you very closely, and perhaps even Menoptera from a distance. If they detect your body scent, of course, they will realize it is a disguise, but they will not give you away.'

Krestus looked at Victoria sternly.

You are determined to go through with this, despite the danger?'

Victoria was nervous but resolute.

'I must try. The Doctor and Jamie are always rescuing me when I'm in trouble, so I think it's about time I tried to help them. And I'll have a wonderful advantage over your people because the Rhumon's guns and invisible fences won't hurt me.'

'They will if they are set on high power, remember that.'

'I shall.'

'Then take some rest now. When it is darkest you will set out after your friends. Our agents have reported nothing of them yet, but there is no doubt as to where they would have been taken. You will reach the Republican base before the rising of the new star.'

Twelve

amie groaned and sat up, holding his head tenderly. He Jhad every symptom of a hangover, yet not a drop had passed his lips. In fact a dram or two of the water of life would be most welcome at that moment, but he knew he would have to do without. He looked around, discovering he was still resting precariously on the upturned halftrack. The Doctor and Yostor lay beside him in crumpled heaps, apparently sleeping soundly. Those berries! There were dried smears of their juice all around him, but no trace of their heady scent. Once it had evaporated and the air cleared, the effects must have worn off. But how long had they lain there? He looked up at the ragged circle of sky above them. It was hard to tell for sure but it seemed no brighter than in the early hours. Had they slept right through the day?

The Doctor stirred and slowly sat up, his eyes screwed tightly shut,

massaging his temples with his fingertips.

'And a good evening to you, Doctor,' Jamie said heavily.

'Evening?' The Doctor squinted about him. 'Oh dear, we haven't slept right through the day, have we?'

'We have that. Lucky some beastie didn't make off with us while we slumbered.'

There was a restricted rustle of wings as Yostor roused himself.

'There was little danger,' he said faintly, sitting upright slowly. 'By chance we were well concealed, and the somlos berry vapour would keep most creatures away.'

The Doctor tried to sound cheerful as they recovered their faculties. 'Well, no harm done then. We probably 109

needed the rest after being up all night, anyway.'

'But we've lost hours, Doctor,' Jamie complained, struggling to his feet and dusting down his kilt. 'We've got to see about those grey things in the caves.'

'Yes, Jamie,' said the Doctor gently. 'But how, and where do we go for help? Without Coroth to back up our story, do you think either side will believe us? The Imperials are undoubtedly searching for us as escaped slaves, and the Republicans probably think we had something to do with Coroth's patrol going missing in the first place.'

'Then we must go to a Menoptera village,' Yostor said firmly.

'Aren't all the villages in this area controlled by the Rhumon?' the Doctor said.

'Yes, but their control is not total. We shall find agents of the resistance there who will hide us, I'm certain. And they will know how to make contact with others.'

'How far is the nearest village?' asked Jamie.

'If we start now we should reach one in the Republican sector while the deeper darkness is still upon us.'

'Well let's get started,' said Jamie impatiently, then hesitated, glancing towards the truck's cabin. 'It feels bad to leave Coroth's body up here

for carrion, though,' he added with distaste.

'It won't be easy to carry him down,' the Doctor said, 'but I suppose . . .' He suddenly knelt down and peered intently through the hatchway into the cabin. 'He's gone!'

Jamie and Yostor crouched beside him incredulously. The cabin was undeniably empty.

'Are you sure he was dead?'Jamie demanded.

'I'm positive,' the Doctor retorted with a touch of indignation. 'In any case, how could he have revived with the somlos berry vapour hanging about? We've only just recovered ourselves.'

'Then something took him while we slept. But why didn't it touch us?'

'Perhaps it didn't notice us,' suggested the Doctor. 'It 110

took the easiest prey first out through the front of the cab.'

'Only a few predators are immune to somlos vapour,'

Yostor said, 'but they are small creatures. They could not carry off a body of that size.'

Then it was something that could hold its breath for a powerful long time,' Jamie stated flatly.

'Or something without a circulation or individual organs that required air,' the Doctor said quietly. They looked at each other, then out through the shattered cabin windscreen.

There was no longer a single shred of the grey creature visible. 'I think we had better get away from here as quickly as possible.'

A minute later they were struggling down through the tangled branches of the great tree, taking care not to disturb any more of the somlos berries scattered about them. There seemed to be no main trunk, and each branch sprouted up from a common centre at a sharp angle, making the descent difficult. But eventually the boughs tilted closer to the horizontal and thinned out. With relief they dropped the last few feet to the ashen ground, and stood in the shadow of the huge growth, which rose above them like a great bristling pine cone.

'Look,' Jamie said, pointing to the ground a few feet away. There were speckles of dark blood, mingled with scrape marks in the pale soil.

Beside them was a large, indistinct, oval impression. Even as they took in the implications of the traces there was a slight rustling in the scrub, and the constant chatter of insects suddenly muted.

'This way,' Yostor hissed, and they sprinted off between the trees in the opposite direction and vanished into the shadows of the darkening forest.

Shallvar wondered why Arleene had sent him a second vidigram in three days. The explanation proved dis-appointing.

'I just had to tell you as soon as possible, Kai,' her image chattered excitedly from the screen. 'You'll never guess 111

who I've been sole-visiting with . . .'

It was the Tejjnakov's - a high companion house, next in seniority to the royal house itself, which no doubt accounted for Arleene's satisfaction in gaining admittance to their private circle at last.

'. . . and they've suggested we might holiday with them in Flandree when you return. Isn't it wonderful?'

He froze her image on the screen and scowled at it bleakly. He realized this long and unexpected separation was hard on Arleene, and inevitably she was going to seek outside interests to compensate, but in every message she seemed to talk less and less about the Hokossion family and their real friends. He had not expected his absence to rekindle her overactive social aspirations. She had bettered her status slightly when she married into House Hokossion, and he assumed she would be satisfied. Perhaps he had been wrong.

He set the console to recording mode and dictated a brisk reply, which ended:

'. . . when I get home we are going to start our own family, whether that clashes with the Tejjnakov's holiday plans or not!'

He encoded and dispatched the message buoyed up with a sense of relief in finally having taken a firm stand with Arleene, but already suspecting he would regret his words in the morning. Well, it was too late now.

It was as he brooded that Cansonn quietly entered the cabin bearing a steaming drink on a tray.

'Forgive me, my Lord, but I heard you were still up. If you are having trouble sleeping I thought you might find this relaxing.'

'Hot choll,' said Shallvar with a smile, taking the cup.

'You used to bring me this when I was small and had woken in the night after a bad dream.'

'I trust the efficacy has not worn off, my Lord.'

'I'm sure it hasn't. Thank you, Cansonn.'

Cansonn bowed and departed, leaving Shallvar to sip his drink and think wistfully of simpler times. Gradually Arleene slipped from his mind. By and by he found 112

himself wondering if Captain Draga had somebody to bring her hot choll when she couldn't sleep.

Nevon was also having a troubled night.

Her mind was seething with frustration. She knew what she should do, but did not have the power to do it. And, despite her requests, there was no prospect of support from home. It almost felt as though they were letting her down, as though her work here didn't matter. No, that was impossible.

A loyal child of the revolution was never abandoned.

She needed the contents of the box again.

The last time had felt good, as though her mind had temporarily been cleared and sharpened. All right, but she would ration herself to touch only and keep the lights out -

and perhaps lessen her irrational guilt. She threw off the covers and padded over to the safe. She had become so familiar with the layout of her tiny cabin that she opened it and removed the box in almost total darkness without difficulty.

Back on her narrow bed she rubbed and teased the wicked things over the flesh of her thin straight body with trembling fingers. She shuddered. Yes, the stimulus was working. It was pure and simple and she was sure it aided her thinking.

Perhaps there was a rational scientific explanation for it.

Deep down she knew the idea was absurd, but something seemed to be swallowing her objections even as they tried to surface, leaving only the startling concept unchallenged, pristine and tempting.

Yes, that was an idea. Why not?

Why shouldn't the truth have been hidden from them by the Imperials? Boldly concealing the facts with their decadent materialism. It was another of their plots! Well she'd discovered their secret now and would turn it to the good of the revolution. It would be the force behind the new order that would finally overthrow the Imperials!

Force.

Yes, that was what she had lacked marooned out here: 113

followers whose loyalty to the cause was unquestioned. But, somehow, she now knew they would be there when she needed them.

Victoria flew through the starlit gloom.

Three Menoptera sailed above her, each carrying a line fastened to the rope sling in which she sat. They travelled in almost total silence, save for the rhythmic wash of the translucent wings beating in long, heavy strokes, like surf lapping a distant shore. Her dangling feet skimmed the treetops as she glided through jungle-choked valleys, then skirted the shadowed cliff walls of bleak dry plains, glowing pale and ghostly in the dim light, broken only by a stippling of steaming craters and the jagged fingers of dark crevasses.

Oddly she was not at all scared by her flight because it was so obviously her companions' natural environment. In fact, she was becoming slightly envious, which was unexpected.

At first she had thought of Menoptera as bizarre, if friendly, animals. Then, after working with Nallia, she had made the charitable attempt to regard them instead as misshapen people. Now she suspected it was foolish, and perhaps discourteous, to try to judge them by any human standards.

Or by Rhumon standards as the invaders were doing, and she was determined not to emulate their faults. Menoptera were simply beings in their own right, with their own ways and values. Perhaps you had to fly with them to understand.

Why should they want to build a complicated life when they had this sort of freedom?

Modeenus sat attentively at his console shaking his head and occasionally wringing his hands in agitation. In the privacy of his own cabin he could afford to set aside his staff, which otherwise almost never left his grasp in public.

It lay now on his narrow bed, an empty slot in the upper section of its shaft where a microrecording disc had been removed. Its ornate headpiece concealed a sensitive directional microphone. Like all priests, he was not only the hand, but also the ear of Omnimon. Sometimes it was 114

necessary, for the spiritual good, to hear the words of others spoken in private. They could be so revealing. So he had monitored Lord Shallvar and Draga talking together that morning, and was now listening to the recording once again, sadly confirming his earlier conclusion. Shallvar was becoming far too familiar with that godless female Republican for his liking.

There had been other signs recently, of course. A certain brusqueness and impatience towards him, occasional lapses in attending services, excusing the crew's insolence, and most recently the regrettable oversight in interpreting the alien's analyser readings. If only Shallvar hadn't intervened when he had, he was sure - no, certain - that he would have noted the significance of the results. And now this inexcusable behaviour towards that. . . that Rep witch!

Modeenus dabbed his brow with the sleeve of his robes and tried to calm himself. Was it all part of the general decline in the crew's loyalty quotient that he had noticed in the routine analyser tests in recent months? Was their situation on the planet truly sapping their commitment to the great cause? But surely they had laboured to the full. Had he not caused the natives' heathen temples to be torn down, or their entrances buried? It was unfortunate that they seemed to have no equivalent of priests to keep them in line, because then he could have forced them to recant and perhaps turned them to his advantage. However, there were converts already following the path, and even a few natives studying to become lay brethren in the service of Ornnimon. Not many, it was true, but then the natives were simple beings, easily led astray. No doubt some had been beguiled by the Republicans' lies, but they would see the light in the end - or be cast out when the final judgement was rendered!

He mopped his brow again. At times like this he needed to recharge himself spiritually. He replaced the recording disc in his staff and left the cabin.

The deserted corridors were illuminated by dim night lights as he made his way along them. Only the native 115

cleaners and night watch were awake. Two decks down he reached the chapel and closed its heavy doors behind him with satisfaction. The light sparkled off the altar regalia, the ornate lectern holding *The **Book of Omnimon*** and brought to glowing life the triptych of the royal family piously at prayer. All dedicated to the glory of the One, the Dawn and Sunset of Life, the Quickener. . . The words and phrases flowed through him and he felt uplifted already. Striding forward he bowed before the altar and the holy trigon which hung behind it, drinking in the pure colours of emerald, sapphire and ruby that circled the great yellow diamond at the centre, as the sun was the centre of the system. Yes, this was the one path, the way, the truth!

Hear thy most loyal and devoted servant, Oh Chalice of Light! What is thy will?

His subsequent cry and the thud of his body collapsing to the floor were completely muffled by the chapel's thick walls.

For the first time in his life his prayers had literally been answered.

116

Thirteen

he last stage of Victoria's journey had been overland, Tas flying near the Republican base was too dangerous. She and her three aerial bearers made a prearranged rendezvous in a sheltered glade. Awaiting them was another member of the resistance named Valio, together with a myriped: the Vortisian counterpart of a millipede but fifteen feet long and standing as high as her waist.

Fortunately it was perfectly docile, and carried the two of them along at good speed and in surprising comfort.

As she approached her destination the knot in Victoria's stomach grew tighter, and she was thankful that Valio could not read her expression under her disguise. Learning of her association with the legendary Doctor, Valio assumed she was cast in the same daring mould. She knew she was nothing of the sort, yet if pressed she would not have

been able to explain just why she was attempting something so audacious, so counter to her natural instincts. Of course she wanted to rescue the Doctor and Jamie, but was it also a test of her own courage? To prove she could make bold decisions and see them through, in anticipation of the time when she would choose her own destiny?

Just before dawn they came to an ash plain dotted with low scrub bushes and scattered copses of taller trees. In one of these they dismounted and tethered the myriped. Silently, Valio led her forward from bush to bush, and she realized what good camouflage the Menoptera's body markings provided in the shadowy undergrowth. The strips of waxed fabric bound around her also gave some protection from occasional thorns, and she began to feel 117

that her disguise was insulating her from reality. Perhaps it would allow her to pretend she was braver than she felt.

Emboldened, she pressed on for about half a mile until, peering through a thicket, she found they had reached their objective.

Ahead was a ditch surrounding an earth bank, topped by a stockade-like fence that curved away on either side to form a complete circle. The small figures of Rhumon guards could be seen patrolling behind the fence, while rising from the middle of the enclosure beyond them was the massive truncated metal cone of the Republican spacecraft.

'In there they will have taken your friends,' Valio said softly. 'Our watchers have not spied them yet, but they most probably arrived in one of their closed land vehicles and have been kept inside the compound ever since.'

As she looked on a gate opened in the stockade and a party of a dozen or so workers, mostly Menoptera with a few Imperial prisoners, emerged together with a couple of guards. Most of the Menoptera were females, she noticed, and all were carrying buckets or pitchers of some description. She hoped to see the Doctor or Jamie, but they were not among them.

'Water-gatherers,' Valio explained. 'See the worn pathway through the trees? At its far end is a spring, the nearest one to the Republican craft. Apparently they cannot drill deeply enough for more, nor spare the time or materials to build sufficient pipes to draw from it directly. So they replenish their water reserves every day'

'Where do these Menoptera come from?'

'Settlements in the valleys around the plain. Most are being punished for breaking the new laws. A Rhumon called Nevon lectures them regularly to try to make them confess their faults, so-called.'

'But why don't they fly away? There are only two guards.'

'Their wings are pinioned and both the path and spring are bounded by energy fences. See their generators?'

Victoria now noticed a line of small metal pyramids 118

dotted along either side of the path. She looked thoughtfully at the straggling column winding through the trees and bushes and the two bored-looking guards minding it, then took a deep breath.

'Can we get closer to the spring? Where the bushes are close to the line of the fence?'

A few minutes later they were looking through the bushes to the spring. It was an open pool surrounded by lush vegetation festooned with brilliant blooms, reminding Victoria of the picture of a desert oasis from a story book.

The workers were filling up their containers and starting back with their first loads. The guards waited long enough to see the job started, then wandered back down the path again. Victoria noticed that a few containers had been left by the pool side, presumably because their owners had found they could not manage to carry two loads at once. She waited for the water carriers to settle into their task and the party to become spread out. Finally came a moment when the spring was temporarily deserted. She took a deep breath and said quickly, 'Wait for me where we left the myriped as long as you can.' Then she stepped forward through the invisible fence.

There was only the slightest of tingles. She filled one of the spare containers and carried it on her shoulder back down the pathway. One of the guards was sitting in the shade of a bushy shrub that overhung the path. She held her breath as she passed but he did not give her a second glance.

Walking quickly she caught up with one of the Menoptera women. As she reached her side the woman gave her a brief listless glance and dropped her head again. Then her antennae trembled and she turned to look at Victoria more searchingly.

'Please don't give me away,' Victoria whispered. 'I am a friend of the

Menoptera people, and of the Doctor who helped you defeat the Animus. He has returned to Vortis!'

Then rather lamely she added, 'I don't suppose you've seen him, have you?'

* * *

119

The Doctor and Jamie waited almost half an hour in the grove on the outskirts of the village before Yostor returned to them. He brought with him a young and vigorous Menoptera man named Hrota, who gazed at the Doctor and Jamie in awe, and not a little puzzlement.

'Are you truly the Doc-tor?' he asked. You are clearly of his kind, but I recall that the fur that grew upon his head was said to be white.'

The Doctor brushed back his mop of dark hair self-consciously. 'Well it has been a few years, you know, and none of us stay the same forever. But I am the Doctor, really.'

'I heard him tell the story of the great struggle as no other could,' Yostor said firmly. 'He is the one.'

'Then you and your companion are most welcome to the dwelling place of Rantor,' said Hrota. 'How may we aid you?'

'First we need somewhere to hide, if that's possible.'

'Aye, everybody's after us,' Jamie explained. 'Imperials, Republicans, grey beasts.'

'And we need tools to remove that dreadful pinion from Yostor's wings, and a means of communicating with your Resistance. We have important information for them.'

'And a bite of food wouldn't come amiss,' Jamie added with feeling.

'We shall see what may be done. There are still those here who have not surrendered their minds to the invaders' ways.

A place of concealment first, then. There is somewhere you will be undisturbed, save only for those who would not betray you. Come.'

He led them round the outskirts of the quiet village, its individual dwellings resembling giant wasps' nests hanging from the great trees,

looking as though they had been woven like baskets. There was one more substantial building, however: a truncated pyramid some seventy feet high, built of many courses of stone with a square-fronted entrance porch projecting from one side.

'Our Temple of Light,' Hrota explained. 'Its doors are 120

barred and locked by order of the Republicans, who say such things are wrong. They intend to tear it down when they find the time.'

'With any luck that shall never be,' the Doctor assured him firmly.

They circled to approach the temple from the rear, ducking under the plate-like leaves of a spreading tree to reach its base course of cyclopean masonry.

'This is a secret known only to a few,' Hrota explained, carefully feeling along the stonework, then pressing hard.

Silently a great block moved inward and pivoted smoothly aside. They ducked through into a dark tunnel. Hrota swung the block back into place, then felt his way past them. There was a click, and a rectangle of light appeared as another stone rolled back. They passed through and found themselves inside the central chamber of the temple.

High above them was a square of star-filled purple sky, where the tapering, inward-sloping walls of the pyramid formed a window to the heavens. Silver tracery decorated the smoothly rendered interior of the vault in patterns resembling the branching veins in Menoptera wings. They caught the daylight and reflected it, sparkling and iridescent, down to the temple floor.

'I'd quite forgotten how beautiful these places could be,'

murmured the Doctor.

Yostor sighed. 'It has been so long since I remembered our makers in their own house. I feel at peace once more.

Here we shall be safe.'

Yes,' agreed Hrota. 'The last place any will think to search for you is behind doors apparently so securely locked and sealed from the outside.'

Torth kicked against the bars of his cage in frustration. They remained

as solid as before. He began pacing up and down.

Three strides was all the cage allowed.

'Feel better now?' snapped Annolos irritably.

'I can't simply wait here at the mercy of miserable scheming wingmen. It's the duty of every soldier of the 121

People's Army if taken prisoner to attempt to escape, thereby diverting the enemy's manpower and resources from the combat zone.' It sounded like a quotation from a manual.

'Well your soldiers get enough practice,' Annolos replied automatically, then added quickly as Torth s crest rose in anger, 'Sorry. Force of habit. I'm here too, remember'

Torth glowered for a moment, then shrugged and returned to his pacing. 'There must be a way out of here. Or to send word, somehow.'

'Without communication? They haven't exactly left us much to build a transmitter with.'

'Any sort of signal. Just enough to let somebody know where this place is. Think! You were a tech. Isn't there anything?'

'Well, I don't. . ' Annolos's eyes widened. 'Er... maybe . . '

'Yes?'

'Our watches, possibly. If your battery is still charged and if we can get the cases off, with parts from both, maybe I can make a simple pulse beacon . . . No, forget it. I'll need some sort of fine tool. A microdriver at least.'

'There's a microdriver built into the strap of mine.' He saw the expression on Annolos's face. 'So our watches often need adjusting. Will that do it?'

'Maybe . . . no. There won't be enough power to transmit through all this rock. We'd have to get it up to the surface somehow.'

'We'll solve that problem when we come to it.' Torth unfastened his watch and tossed it over to Annolos, who began examining it with interest. Then he looked up in concern.

'You realize there'll be no way to tune it properly.

Anybody might pick up the signal'

'We'll take the chance, agreed? Whether your people or mine come first it doesn't matter. Just as long as we get out of here!'

* * *

122

Nevon seemed oddly distracted that morning, Draga thought. Her usual list of demands about minor matters of discipline was delivered in an almost half-hearted manner, and she even let a few sly personal comments of Relgo's pass unchallenged. It was only when they touched on the matter of the 'ghosts' that her normal brittleness reasserted itself.

'The rumours about missing personnel are getting out of hand,' Draga was saying. 'Before the crew starts to imagine seeing ghosts of the sector-seven patrol I intend to put a stop to it once and for all.'

'Agreed,' Nevon responded quickly. 'It is essential for discipline that no more time be wasted on the subject.'

'Good. Then I have your official support to exhume the bodies from the graveyard.'

'What? You cannot do that!'

'I know it's an unpleasant idea, but it's the only way to quash this. It started with supposed sightings of our early casualties in the forest, then the talk of undead and spirits. I intend to shock this nonsense out of them.'

'No. I cannot permit this. It will have a detrimental effect on morale.'

'It can hardly make it worse,' Relgo pointed out.

'No,' Nevon persisted. 'I will not -'

The desk communicator beeped and Draga answered.

'Main gate here, Captain-Commander,' came an excited voice. 'Six of our people have just walked in. They escaped from the Imperial camp!'

'Escaped? Are they well?'

'Tired and hungry, but not too bad. They've walked over a day and night to get here, between hiding out from patrols.'

'Have them sent to the sickbay immediately. I'll see them there.' She switched off the communicator and glanced at Relgo's huge grin of relief. 'You realize they must have escaped before my meeting with Shallvar yesterday, but he let me think he still had them to bargain with, so we handed over our prisoner list without any fuss.'

'Deceit is what you expect from such as he, as I have warned before,' Nevon stated flatly. 'I trust you will take this example to heart.' There was a knowing undertone to her words that Draga found disconcerting.

By the time they reached the sickbay, the escapees were already having minor injuries tended and being fed high-energy liquid concentrates.

'They're generally sound,' the doctor reported. 'A few days of extra rations and supplements should see them fit again. The Imperials kept them short of both, of course.

Even their own concoctions would have been better than nothing, but what else can you expect of slavers?'

Draga kept the debriefing informal, and fortunately Nevon did not interfere. Her first question was inspired by a rapid scan of their faces.

'Where's Scout Commander Coroth and Squadman Nurvo? Didn't they escape with you?'

'There were these two aliens, Captain-Commander,' a weary but excited soldier began. 'They got us out. And the natives too. They insisted. The barriers didn't stop them. . .'

Piece by piece she assembled the sequence of events.

'So Coroth and Nurvo took the aliens and a native back to look for their friend in this settlement in the buffer zone?'

she concluded.

'And to look for his missing men, Captain. You could see he felt bad about leaving them.'

'Especially after how Nurvo said they'd gone,' added another escapee.

'Gunfire, shouts and screams, then nothing,' a third said.

'He reckoned there was something strange in the tunnels,'

the first confided to her, half fearful, half thrilled by the prospect.

'Something strange in the tunnels', thought Draga grimly, was a phrase destined to feed the very rumours she was planning to quash earlier. And as soon as the escapees mixed with the rest of the crew that was just what would happen. Was this what Shallvar had alluded to? Perhaps 124

there really was some mystery out there, but if so it had to be faced objectively without superstition confusing the investigation. She glanced at her watch.

'Relgo, I want all the crew who can be spared to assemble at the graveyard memorial by hour eleven.' She glanced sternly around the sickbay. 'That includes all of you.' There was a puzzled murmur. Nevon started to protest again, but Draga countered with a sharp 'Your advice is noted but my decision is made, Officer Nevon. You will arrange a monitor camera to relay events to the rest of the ship. Is that clear?'

'Yes, Captain-Commander,' Nevon said stiffly.

Draga strode from the room and headed directly for the outer lock. Outside in the compound a handful of native water carriers were heading back from the tanks for another load, chattering softly among themselves in their own tongue.

You there - follow me!' she commanded, and they fell in uncertainly behind her.

A gang was working on the perimeter embankment. She called over the overseer, 'Get all the prisoners down. Have them bring their tools. Everybody but wall guards to the graveyard.'

She heard Relgo's voice over the speakers, and was aware of crewpeople beginning to emerge from the ship behind her. At the gate she directed the guards to open a gap in the fence to allow the prisoners to pass. A little way from the perimeter wall on the edge of the cleared ground was a grove of trees with broad spreading leaves. In their cool shade were fourteen graves and a block of native stone

roughly dressed and inscribed:

FOR THE PEOPLE AND TO THE GLORY OF THE

REVOLUTION, THEY GAVE THEIR LIVES.

This was followed by a list of names longer than the number of graves. Those missing presumed dead, whose bodies had never been found, were remembered as well. Most had died in the brief clash between the ships that 125

had marooned them all here, and accidents and skirmishes had claimed a handful since then. But as she looked upon the stone her crest spines flattened as she realized that the names of the missing patrol had yet to be added. They would have to start on a fresh face of the stone. The missing would then outnumber the rest.

'Get them to open the graves,' she directed the overseer of the working party, 'but don't let them damage the caskets.'

The prisoners began to scoop at the soft soil.

Nevon arrived with a crewman holding a vidicamera who began relaying the scene. Then Draga found Relgo at her side.

'Should the Royals or the natives see this?' he asked quietly.

'We are not afraid of the sight of our dead — they should learn that as well. The natives are almost as bad as the Imperials. We remember our dead with honour, but not with false pride or superstitious reverence . .

Draga paused, aware of a flicker of uncertainty within.

She recalled the annual commemoration in City Number One of the death of the first Coordinator of New Rhumos.

'The Father of the Revolution', some called him. The ceremony had grown more elaborate every year, and had even been beamed out to them on the edge of the system. A million people in the great square chanting and applauding, the atmosphere almost palpable. So much emotion focused on the memory of one individual. It almost seemed . . .

indecent. Not for the first time she wondered about its cost.

The Mausoleum of the People became grander with every generation, with refurbishments and extensions and the addition of another giant face carved into its sheer walls to stare out over the city. In fact it contained no ordinary people at all but only the bodies of successive Coordinators.

Some had been related. People pointedly did not speak of a dynasty.

She shook off her reverie and continued firmly, 'They are nothing but decomposed bodies now. Perfectly natural.

That is what the dead become. There are no such things as ghosts.'

One by one, the excavators uncovered the cheap, flimsy plastipanel caskets, already showing signs of degradation even in the relatively dry soil. The prisoners were ordered out of the pits and soldiers climbed down in their place.

'Open them,' Draga commanded. 'Prove you have more sense than the Imperials or natives.'

Hesitantly, a soldier tugged at a lid panel. A piece came off in his hands and a side section bowed as a seam split.

There was a half-smothered nervous laugh. He changed his grip and lifted the lid clear.

There was nothing inside but ashy soil.

In the silence that followed Draga heard herself say faintly, 'Open them all ... do it!'

One by one the lids were thrown back.

All they contained were thin layers of soil and a few shreds of shrouding cloth.

The spell was broken and an uneasy mutter and shuffling of feet ran through the watchers.

'Quiet!' Relgo shouted, drawing his sidearm. Draga stepped down into the nearest pit and looked at the empty casket. There was no sign of any recent disturbance, nor trace of anything untoward, except for the licence of what should have been there. She recalled the earth as it had been dug away. It had been at least half compacted. Whatever

had removed the remains had done so some time ago. She climbed out of the pit fighting to keep her self-control.

'Put the lids back on. For the moment cover them all up again. Quickly! The rest of you back to the ship. I will make an announcement before third meal tonight. Until then . . .

just get on with your duties.'

The crew began to drift back to the compound while the overseers brandished their rifles threateningly, shouting at the prisoners to cover their own confusion. Frightened, they began to scrape and push frantically at the excavated earth.

Draga watched on bleakly while

Relgo and Nevon flanked her, waiting expectantly. What could she say to them? As she deliberated she was dimly aware of a guard goading the prisoners to work faster. They flinched away from him and a wingless female Menoptera lost her balance and slid forward into the pit. The woman gave an odd cry as her outstretched arm struck the side of the half-buried casket and the brittle plastipanel cracked.

Unaccountably she heard the sound of ripping cloth.

Every eye seemed to turn even as the woman clasped at her arm, trying futilely to pull a black fabric strip back over the pink flesh beneath. Rifles jerked around to cover her.

Nevon recovered her voice first. Pointing a grey-gloved hand at the trembling woman she said simply, 'Bring that creature to me.'

The rasping of the fine-bladed hacksaw ended in a slight snap. The Doctor and Jamie gently prised apart the pinion strips and pulled them free. Slowly Yostor extended his wings and gave a low groan.

'Are you all right?' the Doctor asked anxiously. 'We haven't hurt you?'

'You were most careful,' Yostor assured him. 'My flight muscles have grown stiff from disuse, that is all. I will recover.'

Jamie looked at the line of puncture holes in the glittering wings queasily. 'You're sure you'll be able to fly?'

'The wing veins are undamaged. Small holes in the membrane do not

matter. In a while I shall be able to fly again.'

'You'd fly here, inside your . . . church?'

'We fly to the light, to the sky, and here is where we thank the Gods who brought the gift to us. What more fitting place?'

'You know, when I was last here I didn't have a chance to learn much of your religion,' the Doctor said. 'I'd be most interested if you'd tell me something of your beliefs, if you don't mind.'

'They are not "beliefs", Doctor,' said Yostor gently, his wings flexing more easily as he worked his shoulders and stretched his arms gracefully. 'They are simple facts. Long ago the Gods gathered a chosen few primitive Menoptera and brought them to Vortis where they might grow. They gave us the gift of flight to rule over the rest of the creatures of Vortis wisely. So we remember them with gratitude and look forward to joining with them once more after death.

Thus our dead are cremated so that their essence may rise up to the stars and the light to join with them once more. I know this is so because the Gods have not forgotten us, and still visit Vortis at times.'

'What?' Jamie exclaimed. 'You've . . . actually seen them?'

'Once. When I was young,' Yostor admitted wistfully. 'A strange and wonderful light grew in the sky and my parents carried me to the temple with the others. We saw the glow reflected down the sky shaft and it was terrible and beautiful. I wanted to fly up to it, but my mother held me back, even though it called to her also. A few could not be restrained and rose up when the light was brightest through the sky shaft and left the temple. Some fell back exhausted, but those who had the strength to brave the light and power touched the God and were taken from this world to dwell with them.'

'You mean they never came back?'

'It is how it was,' Yostor said simply, and with that he spread his wings and with a steady beat rose up to spiral slowly about the chamber.

'It is so good to fly once more!' he called down.

Jamie looked up at him with a troubled frown.

'What do you make of it, Doctor? Do these "Gods" of theirs actually come here and take a few chosen ones every time they visit? I can't believe that.'

'It's certainly an unlikely eventuality,' the Doctor conceded. 'More probably a misinterpretation of some infrequent natural phenomenon such as an intense electrical storm. But remember, whatever actually takes place at such times, Yostor is clearly sincere in his belief, so it would 129

probably be best if we do not express our doubts too strongly for now. A religion represents a people's dreams and hopes, their past and future, their link with something beyond the definable. And at the moment such belief is helping to sustain the Menoptera through a time of great hardship. Would you deny them such solace?'

'Well. . . no, of course. I didn't say I was going to cause a fuss, just that I can't believe it.'

'As long as you show tolerance and they do the same for you, that's all that matters,' the Doctor said, looking up at Yostor still circling above them. 'Besides, if you want to exercise your mind I can give you a more immediate puzzle than the nature of the Menoptera's Gods of Light.

Something else I didn't investigate properly when I was last here.'

'And what would that be?'

'How beings the size and weight of Menoptera can possibly fly.'

The alien female spy with the ridiculous name did not impress Nevon.

Victoria had squealed irritatingly as they removed her disguise to see what kind of creature hid beneath. She had protested further when she was put in the analyser chamber.

Now, as they considered the results, she looked at them despairingly, chin trembling, obviously scared to death, clutching the remains of her costume chastely to herself.

Nevon suspected that some of the Menoptera prisoners must have known who she was, but it was hardly worth the effort to find out as it would shortly be of no consequence.

Meanwhile, the girl might have her uses. She had already provided a

welcome distraction from the mystery of the empty graves.

The interrogation continued.

'The Menoptera resistance obviously helped you with that disguise,' Draga said. 'They must have some kind of base relatively close by. Where is it?'

'I don't know!' the alien protested. 'I was unconscious when they took me there and blindfolded on the way 130

out. So I couldn't tell, no matter what,' she added, with a trace of returning spirit.

Sensible and probably true, Nevon thought regretfully.

'Nevertheless you have infiltrated our camp as a spy, and you know what the penalty for spying is?'

'But I'm not a spy! I already told you, I'm just looking for my friends. Your soldiers took them. I was lost in some tunnels. . .'

They heard her story all over again. Nevon had to admit, aside from the nature of the alien's spacecraft, which the girl seemed confused about, it sounded convincing. It fitted the known facts and it was easy to see how she and the natives had assumed they had been holding her companions. When it became clear she had nothing more to tell she was put in a cell while they conferred.

'Clearly the prior removal of the bodies from the graves is part of some Imperial plot,' Nevon stated bluntly. 'All this time they have been secretly undermining our will by trickery and deception.'

'How can you be so sure it's them?' Draga asked. 'The girl mentioned something odd she encountered in the tunnels. It confirms the story our escapees told. Perhaps there is something worth investigating.'

'It was dark and she was scared,' Nevon reminded her. 'If there was anything it may also be part of the Imperial plot, in which she and her companions may be involved. Before pursuing phantoms we must first investigate this greater probability. Here we can turn the arrival of the alien girl to our advantage.'

'How?' Relgo asked.

Nevon permitted herself a half smile.

'It is evident these aliens can pass through low-power energy screens without difficulty. Consider how many Imperial security systems are actuated by similar sensors.

There is a reasonable chance they have not yet been modified to include the aliens' patterns.'

'Oh,' Relgo nodded in understanding. 'Yes, but can we trust her?'

'If we use a security collar and her own self-interest. It is unlikely she had time to learn that her friends also escaped from the Imperials. If she thinks she may be able to help them she will cooperate. We can monitor her progress and may learn much to our advantage.'

'But what if the Imperials find her?' Draga said. 'She's obviously an amateur at this game, and her companions did help our people escape.'

'Purely in their own interests to gain Squadleader Coroth's cooperation' Nevon pointed out. 'An arrangement I do not approve of and which Coroth will regret when and if he returns.'

'What about Coroth?' Relgo interjected. 'He should have been back by now.'

'Perhaps the aliens proved treacherous, or an Imperial patrol caught them. Meanwhile we cannot spare resources to search for two unreliable soldiers and we must make use of the girl immediately. Remember, if she is simply a wandering alien she still has no call on any misplaced sentimentality and strictly speaking should be executed for spying. If, on the other hand, she is in league with the Imperials, voluntarily or otherwise, she may inadvertently reveal herself once within their base.'

It required little more persuasion before they agreed to her plan. Draga and Relgo were still more preoccupied with the problem of keeping the crew in order after the earlier fiasco. They were probably relieved she had not said, 'I told you so.'

Victoria sat miserably in her tiny bare cell, hugging the scraps of her disguise around her. She shivered, but not from cold.

She had felt so daring making her enquiries under the guards' noses like that, even though she hadn't found out anything useful so far. She

hoped none of the Menoptera would get into trouble, but at least for once she had tried to act boldly and not simply to let others take risks for her.

Imagine the looks on the Doctor's and Jamie's faces if she had rescued them, and not the other way round. Now it 132

had all gone wrong and all she could do was try to keep her composure, whatever came next.

The cell door opened and the sinister grey-clad Republican woman entered — the one they had called Nevon.

Victoria flinched away. There was a coldness about her that she found frightening.

Nevon spoke with clinical directness.

'You have two choices, alien. Either you can be executed as a spy, or you can do us a service which may absolve your crime. It is as simple as that, and there are no other options.

Decide.'

'What. . . would I have to do?'

Your disguise will be repaired and you will be provided with a two-way audio-visual communicator operating on a narrow security beam. You will be taken to a point close to the Imperial base where, under our guidance, you will infiltrate as you did here and so gain information on the Imperials' plans and defences. As an incentive, I may inform you that it is possible that your friends are being held in the Imperial base. While you are there you may be permitted to aid them, if this does not compromise your usefulness to us. Well, do you agree?'

'I suppose I don't really have much choice, do I?' 'None at all,' Nevon confirmed.

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Fourteen

he tutorial was over and Bris and Ilex had a free Tperiod during which they could return to their laboratory and observe progress. All the results were being recorded by the automatic monitors, of course, but

it was exciting to see how rapidly things changed. That was the advantage of a small-scale, relatively short-term project such as theirs. They ensured Twel had left the tutorial zone first before they themselves headed rapidly in the other direction, quickly cutting through a shadow field just to be sure they were not being followed. As they went Bris communicated in basic speech on their personal band:

'Observe item self obtained.'

A memory module, pulsing with intricate patterns, was produced for Ilex's examination. 'Impressive. Contains what?'

'Copy from tutorial data matrix. Circuit design for high-density, low-temperature interface control enhancement.'

'Useful,' Ilex agreed, adding, 'Observe item self obtained.'

A similarly concealed insulated flask was revealed. 'Extra protoform matter from experimental supply.'

'Advantageous acquisition,' Bris said, admiring the amorphous multipurpose construction material. 'Comple-mentary items. Will improve interactive/manipulative units.'

They sped on through the shadows.

A long way behind, out of the range of their senses, Twel followed their course at a steady pace. There was no need for haste. Attuned to the signal from the tracer concealed in the protoform flask, Twel could not lose track of them now, no matter where their project entrance had been relocated.

Fifteen

nnolos held up the tiny haywire assemblage of A watch components for Torth to see. 'That should do it. But the signal will never penetrate this rock. We have to get it to the surface somehow. Any ideas on that yet?' Torth was grinning. 'Maybe. Do you play Thrinkt?'

'Of course. Up to fifth level. But what's this got to do with-'

'You'll see. Let's just start a game.'

'But we haven't any pieces or board.'

'Then we'll improvise. That's the whole point. . .'

Jamie could not understand the Doctor's puzzlement at the Menoptera's ability to fly. They had wings, they flapped them, they flew — it seemed perfectly straightforward. The Doctor's attempts at explaining aerodynamic theory were largely wasted on him. Besides, he was too concerned for Victoria to take much notice. If those grey beasts had found her . . . no, it didn't bear thinking about. He desperately wanted to leave the temple, to fight, to do something.

Circumstances dictated, however, that the only sensible thing to do was wait. But he didn't have to like it. Only after some hours did he realize the Doctor might be feeling exactly the same way, and was burying himself in his aerodynamics problem to spare himself the anguish and frustration that dominated Jamie's miserable thoughts.

They were at least moderately safe and comfortable.

Hrota had brought them more food and water, and 135

several times they had received clandestine visits, via the secret entrance, from sympathizers in the village. They came both to worship in the temple and to see and speak with, and even touch reverently, the Doctor. Preoccupied as he was, Jamie began to appreciate what the Doctors name symbolized for the Menoptera. It was moving to see how they left standing straighter and with renewed lightness in their graceful steps, after the Doctor's gentle words of encouragement and the promise that he would not leave Vortis until it was at peace again. Hrota also confirmed that a message had been sent to the Resistance, who would make contact when it was safe to travel. Currently there were still too many invader patrols about.

Draga's voice echoed over the *Liberation Day's* speakers before third meal as she had promised.

'Attention all crew. This is Captain-Commander Draga speaking. You all witnessed, whether in person or on a monitor, the discovery earlier today that some unknown agency had removed the remains of our noble war dead from their proper resting places. No doubt you have been speculating as to the nature of this agency. Probably, despite warnings to the contrary, the words "undead" or "ghosts"

have been spoken, and it may seem as though today's events have given some credence to those outmoded suspicions.

This is nonsense. A perfectly rational theory has been advanced to

explain these and other incidents, which even now is being investigated . . .'

By taking a most tortuous and circuitous route, the small four-man scout car brought Victoria as close to the Imperial base as its crew dared. She climbed out nervously, finding herself in a narrow rocky gorge, already filling with shadows as the half-night of Vortis approached.

The driver and guard bid her a quick ironic 'Good luck, alien,' then turned the car in a tight circle and drove silently off. If she completed her task and escaped from the Imperial base safely, they would come back for her, but for now she was on her own. She thought ruefully of 136

Valio, who was probably still waiting in the grove. She had said nothing about him during her interrogation and hoped the Republicans would not suspect she had a contact so close to their base.

'Turn left and head up the gorge,' the voice of Nevon came over the tiny speaker plug in her ear. With a resigned sigh she obeyed. A miniature camera and microphone had been fixed to the side of her head, pointing out through the bubble of fine mesh that mimicked a Menoptera's large compound eye. Back at their base, Nevon and the rest could see and hear everything around her. Even though many miles separated them, she was their puppet worked by invisible strings. The thick heavy collar locked around her neck and concealed by the fur of her false cowl ensured that. At the touch of a button Nevon could cause it to deliver an electric shock: a further incentive, as she put it. The intensity of the shocks, she had added ominously, could be increased.

Victoria proceeded along the gorge as she had been directed.

Draga entered the communications bay, where Nevon and Relgo were watching the picture from Victoria's camera on a monitor. On a screen beside it the point of light representing Victoria's locator signal crawled slowly over a contour map of the area surrounding the Imperial base.

'That was a satisfactory statement, Captain-Commander,'

Nevon said, which was as close as she ever came to a compliment. 'It should serve to put the crew at ease on the matter.'

'It felt like delivering a Ministry of Information text. This scheme of yours had better work. I'm still not happy about using the girl - or that device.'

'I'm sure the results will justify the means.'

On the console before her was the control handset for Victoria's collar. Nevon's fingers hovered over the charge intensity dial.

* * *

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The flower forest thinned out and Victoria saw the of the Imperial camp ahead, closing off the steep-sided canyon.

She could see soldiers patrolling across the ramparts, and the curving hull of the *Royalist* beyond. The collar pricked her neck.

'Continue,' came Nevon's voice in her ear. 'Say what I told you.'

Victoria swallowed hard and marched out of the tree and along the rutted track towards the stockade gate. When she was twenty yards from it a voice called out, 'Halt! What do you want here?'

'Please ... I wish serve you,' she replied, in soft, lilting Menoptera tones, but speaking in halting Rhumon.

'What?'

'I wish serve bringers of true light so I learn new way,'

she continued. 'Your great Father Modeenus tell us this is good thing when he come to our village. But my people not all believe. We fight. So I come here.'

She heard an enquiry to the wall guard from below and a muttered conversation, followed by, 'So she's a convert is she? That'll cheer him. All right, let her in.'

The gates swung open and Victoria stepped hesitantly forward. A couple of grinning guards descended the wall steps and looked her over curiously.

'So, you think you can work your way up to the light, do you?'

'I will learn of true God by service. I would serve Father Modeenus.

Where he is, please?'

'Praying in chapel, probably. Anyway, you've got to work for us ordinary men first. We got a few more of your kind in earlier to make up for the ones we lost yesterday. Maybe you'd better come in and show them how it should be done.

I hope you believe dirt is holy'

'Please?'

'Never mind. Here you start from the bottom. How are you at cleaning?'

Nevon felt an unaccustomed glow of satisfaction as Draga and Relgo watched Victoria's progress over her shoulder.

'I know Modeenus's ways and the Imperial mind,' she said. 'He has been preaching his servile theology to the natives and his people cannot do without their slaves. After the escape they would tend to take mainly native women from their controlled villages for replacements, as they see females as little threat to them. One more appearing, and flattering their egos, was bound to be accepted with little suspicion.'

Inside the Imperial spacecraft, Victoria was on her hands and knees scrubbing floors for the first time in her life.

She had been working for hours, or so it seemed. Her back ached, her knees were sore. It must have been done like this at home, she realized, probably by one of the maids. But she never remembered actually seeing it done.

Of course, you rarely saw the lower servants at all. They must have worked either very early or very late, just as she was doing now. In an Imperial ship, apparently, the cleaning began when the night watch took over. She moved her bucket onto the next part of the floor to keep up with the line of Menoptera women strung across half a deck, trying to imitate their natural grace, while being watched over by a couple of bored guards. She was certain a British Navy ship would never have been cleaned by slaves like this, but she suspected the Imperials liked to see their so-called inferiors working at menial tasks. Also, after a year of the dusty soil of Vortis blowing in, the floors needed more cleaning than they could probably spare their own men

for.

A door opened just ahead of her, revealing a room filled with control units covered in lights and glowing panels. A man lazed back in a chair before them.

'Look that way' Nevon commanded.

Victoria stretched her back and squeezed out her cloth, taking the opportunity to peer into the room so the concealed camera could record the scene. An Imperial officer came out and glared at her.

'Pretty lights,' she said quickly.

'Get back to your work, girl!' he snapped, closing the 139

door behind him, and marched away along the corridor.

It was sometimes an advantage to be taken for an inferior primitive, she decided, shuffling along and rubbing out his boot marks. It was the next best thing to being invisible.

They thought a simple native girl was no threat. Well more fool them!

'Now slowly get clear of the others.' Nevon ordered.

Edging away from the rest of the Menoptera women, she boldly proceeded to clean her way through the almost deserted corridors, taking in everything she could for the hidden camera, glancing up at numbers and signs marked, on walls as Nevon required. The few people she met simply stepped by her. Then she came to a door guarded on either side by energy screen emitters, preventing any but Imperial Rhumon passing through it.

'Try the door,' Nevon commanded.

Victoria got up and reached forward gingerly. She had been let through a similar larger screen at the main hatchway by the guards. Now she would learn if she really was immune to the Imperial fences as well as die Republican. She touched the handle. Nothing happened.

'Open it a crack,' Nevon commanded.

She did so and peered through. The corridor beyond was more softly lit than outside, and had a son of dense carpet on the floor, rather than the ribbed rubber-like material she had already become so closely acquainted with. A row of cabin doors ran along both sides. It

was very quiet.

'Good' said Nevon, suddenly sounding eager and impatient. 'Close the door behind you... quietly! Now straight along . . . yes, up those stairs . . . now left and along to the end .. '

In the communications bay Relgo glanced up curiously at the image of a darkened corridor relayed from Victoria's camera.

'Where are you sending her? That looks like the officers'

sleeping quarters.'

Nevon said nothing, staring fixedly at the screen. Her finger flipped up the guard of a second switch on the collar-control handset.

'Nevon? What are you doing?' Relgo demanded, his words carrying to Draga in the main control room. She stepped towards them. Nevon took no notice, but leant closer to the screen.

The door at the end ... the one with the crest... try to open it!' Her finger was raised over the newly exposed button.

Relgo grabbed her wrist and tried to snatch the handset from Nevon. There was surprising strength in the woman's chin frame and they grappled, the device clutched between them. Over the sound channel they heard Victoria gasp in pain, and the image on the screen reeled about crazily.

Draga reached them, grabbed Nevon's arms and wrenched diem backwards. The handset jerked free even as Relgo snatched at it, and bounced across the floor to slide between the base units of two control consoles. Relgo went down on his hands and knees to scrabble after it as the crew looked on in frozen attitudes of astonishment, unsure of what to do as their three most senior officers struggled together. Nevon screamed, 'You don't deserve to be in command, either of you! You haven't the courage to make the hard decisions!'

Relgo grasped the handset and stood up. Carefully he closed the cover over the second button. Then he realized the shock button was jammed down. He tore at it with his fingers but it would not release. He twisted the intensity dial down to minimum - and it came loose from its spindle. On the screen, corridors and doorways rushed past, the camera swinging wildly from side to side, Victoria's moans of pain

coming from the speaker. In desperation he slammed the handset to the floor and stamped on it.

The screen and the sound channel went dead. The blip that had marked Victoria's position in the Imperial ship flickered and died. Slowly Draga released Nevon, both panting. Relgo, his crest raised and livid with anger, picked up the remains of the handset and thrust it at Nevon, who turned her head disdainfully aside.

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'It was a bomb, wasn't it? You planted a bomb on the alien girl and tried to get her into Lord Shallvar's rooms.

Well?'

Nevon said nothing, merely brushing down her uniform and tugging her gloves straight. With an effort Draga found a level voice.

'I do not fight like this!' she stated flatly.

4No, you haven't the stomach for it,' Nevon retorted

'Neither of you. The crew needed to know a blow had been struck against the Imperials for all their deceit. They are the enemy, or had you forgotten?'

'But the girl is not our enemy. We'd be as bad as the Royals if we used her like this.'

'There is only the greater good. The lesser must always be sacrificed. I shall send a report detailing your failings and requesting replacements be sent. Meanwhile —'

'Meanwhile you will keep out of my sight!' Draga hissed.

Without a word Nevon turned on her heel and left the control room. Relgo turned to look at the bridge crew questioningly. One by one they returned to their stations, some faces looking relieved, others angry. If it came to a showdown with Nevon he thought they would have the majority of the crew behind them. But it was no way to run a ship.

'This can't go on much longer,' he said quietly.

'None of it can,' Draga agreed grimly, and for a moment he wondered just what she meant. 'We've all been out here too long and the cracks

are showing. The trouble is I don't know if this is what we've become . . . or were all along.'

Relgo put the remains of Nevon's handset on the table.

'What about the girl? Perhaps we'd better call Shallvar up and find out.'

'No. If the worst has happened it's too late now. And just in case she's survived we'd only be giving her away, and I want to give her every chance to get out of there alive. She deserves at least that much from us.'

142

Torth had scratched the grid of a Thrinkt board in a smooth patch of soil between their two cells, while Annolos had fashioned serviceable replacements for the game pieces from twists of moss, slivers of cell-bar wood and strips of fabric torn from their tunics to give the sides different colours. They were already into their fourth game. Their loud arguments over the interpretations of the rules and accusations of cheating had already caused Menoptera to look in on them on several occasions, when they had been seen to knock over their playing pieces and had to stretch their arms through the cell bars to reach them. The Zarbi detailed to refill their water jugs or bring food came in for particular abuse as it trampled over their playing area, causing them to reach hurriedly for the pieces and wave them angrily at the uncomprehending creature. The same process was repeated the next time it appeared. The third time it took no notice of their hands reaching about its legs to rescue their tokens. Annolos slipped the tracer through the cell bars and snagged it into a joint on the Zarbi's heavy-clawed foot with the thin knotted tail of a strip of fabric in which the mechanism was bound.

The Zarbi filled the water jugs and departed. Torth and Annolos looked at each other in relief.

'They're let out to forage on the surface regularly, like the wild ones,' Torth said. 'We shouldn't have to wait long.'

'Depends how alert the radio watch is. The beacon should radiate across the distress bands, but it'll be faint.'

'But at least we'll have tried,' Torth said passionately.

Nevon, hunched over her terminal, finished dictating her scathing

report, coded it and directed it to the communications room for priority transmission. Briefly she wondered if Draga would try to bar the communication, but there was no interference and the 'message despatched' sign appeared on her screen. Typical! They didn't have the nerve to stop her. Clearly they were unfit for their posts. But would New Rhumos send replacements? Despite her threats to Draga, the home world had

taken little notice of her reports so far. If they didn't respond this time she would simply have to proceed with the plan on her own initiative.

As she brooded her fingers pressed through the fabric of her uniform to stroke the several small irregular bulges scattered across her stomach, chest and upper arms. They were a little uncomfortable but so reassuring. Slowly her expression softened. It would be all right. She was certain of that.

Jamie knew at once that the two Menoptera Hrota ushered through the secret way that night were not of the village.

They wore belts from which hung complicated pistol-like sidearms. One was a large male, the other a slender female, but there was no doubt as to who was in charge. The female stared at them each intently for a moment, then said, 'This is Chalter and I am Nallia of the Free Menoptera. I understand you are Yostor, escaped slave of the Imperials. May you be free from this time forth. I also welcome you, Jamie McCrirnmon, and you, Doctor. Yes, Victoria described you well.'

'Victoria!' Jamie and the Doctor exclaimed together.

'You've seen her? Is she well?'

'She was well when I saw her last, though I cannot be certain of her present condition.'

'But where is she?'

'To the best of our knowledge, still inside the Republican encampment.'

'What was she doing there?'

'Looking for you both. We believed you had been taken there.' 'But

why -'

Nallia held up a slender palm hand.

'Please. We shall explain later when we have more time.

Now Yostor and the two of you must come with us to our base while the way is clear of patrols.'

The Doctor, his face still aglow with relief, composed himself.

'Yes, of course. I'm sorry.' He grasped Hrota's hand.

'Thank you for all you have done for us. I'm sure we'll meet again when this is all over -'

There came the scraping of wood and rattle of chain from outside the temple's double doors.

'They have discovered us!' cried Hrota. 'Quickly, through the back.' He ran to the inner pivoting stone and tugged it open. The buzzing whine of a rifle echoed from the tunnel beyond. Hrota flinched backwards clutching his arm, then threw his weight against the stone and tried to swing it closed, only to meet resistance. Jamie leapt to his side and together they forced it shut. Thumping sounded on the other side.

A body crashed against the main doors, making them shiver, but the inner bar held for the moment. Nallia and Chalter were desperately looking around for some means of escape, pistols drawn.

'We're trapped.'

'No,' said the Doctor pointing. 'Upwards! Through the shaft!'

Four pairs of Menoptera eyes stared at him in horror.

'We cannot, Doctor,' Yostor said faintly. 'That path is for those called to the light only.'

'It's that way or nothing!' cried Jamie. 'We're caught like rats in here!'

Even as the Menoptera hesitated there was a shrill of high-energy gunfire. The inside of the door began to blacken and licks of flame appeared. Suddenly the bar shattered and the chamber filled with smoke. A stiffly erect Menoptera strode out of the haze at the head of

a party of Republican soldiers. He pointed dramatically.

'Hrota, I might have guessed. It is as we said: a nest of believers. And their alien friends. They plot against the revolution!'

Nallia shouted, 'Up! And may the Gods forgive us!'

Jamie felt Yostor catch him under his arms and suddenly he was whisked up towards the square of stars high above.

He glimpsed Hrota taking hold of the Doctor while Nallia and Chalter fluttered into the air, firing down at the soldiers, then he and Yostor were squeezing

through the narrowing aperture and out into the open air, The whine and hiss of energy guns echoed up the shaft behind them. High-intensity beams flickered and shimmered off the reflective walls, illuminating the thin plume of smoke that billowed from the opening.

Suddenly Charter and then Nallia bunt out of the shaft still firing their guns downward.

'Fly, fly!' she said.

'What about the Doctor!'Jamie shouted. 'Hrota was hit. . .

they both fell back. There is nothing we can do for them.

They are lost!'

Sixteen

ravelling circuitously to evade pursuit, Jamie and TYostor arrived at the Resistance base as dawn broke.

Nallia introduced her father, to whom Jamie expressed his concerns. Having to abandon the Doctor to the enemy was bad enough, he felt, but Victoria . . .

'Why did you let her go at all?' Jamie demanded of Krestus once again. 'It was too dangerous for a young lassie.'

' "Lass-ie"?' queried Nallia. 'A girl!'

'It was her right,' Krestus replied evenly, 'and I judged her old enough to choose. That she is female has no bearing on the matter. Was it not the Doctor's companion Bar-bara Wright who actually destroyed the Animus those many risings ago?'

'Yes, but where I come from we . . . och, never mind.

These modern women! And what about the Doctor? Any word on him?'

'We are sure he is alive and has been taken back to the Republican base. There was no opportunity to intercept the vehicle without grave risk to all concerned.'

'But you're sure he is there this rime - you've not got it turned about again?'

'The error was understandable,' Nallia corrected him gravely. 'We cannot watch every move the invaders make, nor know who travels inside their closed machines.'

Jamie's shoulders sagged. 'I suppose not. It's just that I'm fair driven to distraction over both of them. But at least they may be together. Now we've got to see about getting them free.'

'I fear that will have to wait,' said Krestus. 'While Nallia was fetching you, our scouts have reported increased activity about both invader bases. Perhaps in response to your escape, additional patrols are being mounted and heading into the empty zone between the occupied lands.

The refuge lies on the edge of that zone, and we must shortly secure it against discovery. 'But you're well hidden.'

'Yes, but there must be no unnecessary activity until the danger is past.'

Jamie clenched his fists in frustration. He couldn't help Victoria or the Doctor, and there were still those grey beasts to be dealt with. Well, one thing at a time.

'At least let Yostor and me see what your defences are like, in case it

comes to a fight. We've both seen a fair bit of these Rhumon and their ways at close hand, and I've been in a few scraps myself besides.' 'You are a warrior?' Krestus asked. Jamie squared his shoulders. 'I fought with the Clan McCrimmon for the Stuart cause,' he said with pride. He didn't explain that it had been as a piper. Well, he'd carried a claymore too, and had used it.

'We have had no need of trained warriors since the time of the Animus. Obviously the advice of one such as yourself, and a companion of the Doctor, would be of great value.' Jamie felt flattered.

'Aye, well, anything I can do to help.'

'Nallia will show you what you wish.'

'Certainly, Father,' Nallia said. 'And perhaps we should let the Zarbi and larvae out to feed now. It is close to their time and they may not get a chance later.'

'Yes. The children also, briefly, as far as the first cleft.

They must not be denied the sky and the light.'

Draga was relieved that Nevon had not insisted on interrogating the alien personally, as she wanted to proceed by her own methods. She had him taken to the conference room with Relgo in attendance and the guards outside 148

the door. He seemed an even stranger creature than Victoria, yet there was an intriguing quality about him she could not quite identify.

'It is possible we owe you our thanks, Doctor,' she began.

'I am informed you helped a number of our people escape from the Imperial camp.'

'You have a strange way of showing your gratitude,' the Doctor retorted. 'Your people almost killed Hrota.'

'The native who was aiding your escape from the scene of an illegal gathering, also attended by armed dissidents and insurrectionists? He is fortunate to be alive.'

'He was simply attending a place of great spiritual importance to the Menoptera.'

'The patrol who brought you in were called by the native leaders of a settlement under our jurisdiction. It is their choice how they permit those in their village to behave.' She looked at him narrowly. 'Talking of the natives, I understand from some of the prisoners you aided that you have visited this planet before. Some of the more impressionable natives seem to think highly of you.'

'Some do, some don't obviously, or I wouldn't be here. As you said, it's their choice. I don't insist they approve of me or my beliefs. Certainly not at the point of a gun . . . unlike some.'

Draga unexpectedly found herself put on the defensive.

'We are here to help these people build a better, more efficient and rational society.' The words sounded hollow even as she spoke them.

'Is that so? And did you ask the Menoptera if they wanted one first? You hardly seem to command overwhelming popular support. Just a small section of the planet held by strength of arms. How is your way better than the Imperials'?'

'We're just doing our duty.'

'The classic abrogation of responsibility,' the Doctor replied with sudden passion. 'That expression has been invoked to excuse some terrible deeds throughout time and space! But there comes a point when soldiers must be people first and automatons second. I leave it to your 149

consciences to decide if you have overstepped that mark.

Now, where's Victoria?'

The sudden change of emphasis caught her by surprise!

'She's not here.'

'What?'

Draga sighed. 'She went to the Imperial base to look for you and your friend - making full use of the ingenious disguise she used to infiltrate here.'

'Oh no. Can't she stay still long enough for us to catch up with her?' He frowned suspiciously. 'Did she go willingly?'

'There was a degree of coercion, I admit. I wasn’t happy with the

decision —'

'But you were just doing your duty.' 'Don't anger me, Doctor,' she warned him. 'We lost contact, but are still listening out for her tracer signal, and I've increased the number of patrols on the edge of the buffer zone. That's all we can do for her, believe me.' She attempted to regain the initiative. 'But to return to where we started, I only said we might have cause to thank you. There is still the matter of Scout Commander Coroth and Squadman Nurvo. Where are they?' The Doctor's face suddenly darkened. 'I am sorry to say they are both dead.' 'How did they die?' 'Bravely.

Fighting, if that is any comfort. In our search for Victoria and your lost soldiers we encountered some hostile creatures we do not think are native to Vortis.'

'More aliens! It is hard enough to accept that you managed to land here undetected. Now you expect us to believe another group has done the same.'

'Possibly. What can be done once can usually be done again. Or perhaps they were here before you arrived.' Draga hesitated at the suggestion. 'Then why haven't we seen anything of them before now?' Relgo put in.

'Perhaps you have but don't know it. Have there been any strange occurrences? Disappearances? Sightings?' Their expressions spoke for them.

'I see. I'd better tell you what happened to us, then you can tell me what you know . . .'

Nevon monitored the interrogation from her cabin. The listening device in Draga's uniform had expired, but she had planted more permanent ones in key locations through the ship as a matter of course. Now, as she listened to the Doctor's account of his confrontation with the grey creatures, an inexplicable and curiously detached feeling of haste and urgency began to creep over her.

Then a communicator beeped in the conference room.

Draga answered and she heard: 'Captain, we've just detected a signal. . .'

The handful of Menoptera children playing under strict supervision in a narrow sheltered gully before one of the base's concealed entrances were clearly frightened of Jamie at first, thinking he might be an invader. He understood their reaction when Nallia briefly explained their circumstances. He knelt down and tried to make friends.

Nallia had to encourage them nearer until one touched his face curiously. Hesitantly another stroked his hair, unsure whether it was his or some sort of artificial covering. Then they all gathered round him, their small hands tugging curiously at his clothes, and asking questions about where he came from in their high, piping voices. How long had it been since he'd last seen any children at play? Even across the vast gap between their species he sensed their fragile innocence and fascination with life - still apparently undimmed despite their sufferings. In the end it was hard to tear himself away from them and return to more weighty matters.

The base was concealed within caves honeycombing a massive rock outcrop rising amid a maze of radiating, winding canyons and narrow gullies, rugged even by Vortis standards, and too dry to support much growth, though he saw several Zarbi rooting up some sort of dry-husked tubers from the ground.

Together with Yostor he made a rapid tour of the base's concealed ground-level entrances and exits, noting the disposition of guards armed with Menoptera energy gum and a few modified Rhumon weapons. Every entrance seemed to be well protected, though the rugged terrain that was their concealment would also provide any attacking force with excellent cover. Nallia then led them up a tortuous winding stairway within the rock, carved by diligent Optera, to its summit to survey the surrounding land, which they had glimpsed only briefly when they had arrived. Here was also the only substantial greenery around, where a miniature wild forest clung to the crown. It would have made a better place for children to play, Jamie thought, but it was reserved for lookouts alone, who kept within the screen of foliage. Here the water for the base gathered in pools from infrequent rains and permeated down through fissures in the rock to be gathered in cisterns below. The summit was also, of course, the Menoptera's last means of escape. It was as he looked around the strange aerial forest that he saw some familiar objects that brought a wry smile to his lips. Then a deeper frown of concentration.

'Do you think you can find us baskets of some kind?' he asked Nallia.

'Of course. But what would you need them for?'

'You'll see, lassie. You'll see.'

An operator in the *Royalist's* communications room suddenly stiffened, pressed his headphones on a httle tighter, and adjusted the tuning of his set. Then he motioned his superior over.

'Think I've got a signal, sir. In the distress bands. Very faint... in the buffer zone, but I can't get an exact location.'

'One of ours or one of theirs?'

'Crosses both the sets of bands, sir. Very erratic. Comes and goes.'

'Hmm. What patrols are nearest that could get a triangulation?'

* * *

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Draga, Relgo and the Doctor crowded round the communications console as the operator adjusted the tuning.

'Hallo, hallo. Can you hear me?' a voice crackled from the speaker.

'Is that you, alien?' the operator replied cautiously.

'I'm not an alien, I'm Victoria Waterfield!'

Draga saw the Doctor smile broadly.

'Are you all right? Your signal shows. . . you're clear of the enemy base!' Draga said.

'Yes, no thanks to you. Now please tell Officer Nevon that I wish to be collected as promised.'

'Officer Nevon is ... unavailable. But transportation will be on its way to you shortly. Stay in your present position.'

Jamie and Yostor came in just as the children were passing back through the central cavern to their own quarters.

'You're sure those Zarbi things won't disturb them?' he asked Yostor.

'No, they will stay well clear by instinct.'

'Right, we'll keep the rest somewhere handy -'

There was a shout and a sudden cry of childish alarm.

One of the youngsters half flew from the cage cave where he had innocently strayed and into the arms of one of his guardians. Angry words of Rhumon followed him. Jamie looked through the archway to find their source. The two prisoners stared back at him in surprise.

'Another alien,' exclaimed one of them. 'What happened to the girl? Oh, I suppose you've made friends with the wingmen too, have you?'

'If it's any business of yours, I get on well enough with the Menoptera, yes.'

'Then tell them to keep their little brats out of here.'

'I doubt he meant any harm. They're just children. Have you none of your own?'

'No, and never will have probably, thanks to them.' He jerked a finger at Yostor. Nallia appeared to see what the commotion was about.

'Their minds are closed, Jamie. There is only anger within and they pay heed to nothing else.'

'Well they'll heed this.'

Jamie marched determinedly back out into the main cavern and spoke urgently with the children's minder for a minute. Then he returned with several of the youngsters, who filed nervously into the cage chamber staring at the prisoners with large glittering eyes.

'Take them away!' demanded the aggressive Rhumon prisoner.

'Scared?' Jamie taunted. 'They're just wee bairns, minutes with them would tell you that, wings or no. Have you no'

taken the time to do that yet? Well look them closely now, if you've the courage. Because of you people they've all lost their homes and families, but what harm have they done you to deserve that? Tell me so I can explain to them why their mothers and fathers won't coming back.'

The prisoner glowered but said nothing.

'They've got to obey the law,' the other Rhumon pointed out, trying to sound reasonable. 'There are penalties for disobedience.'

'Why? It's not their law and it's not your world. They didn't ask you here, as I understand it. Are they so dangerous to you, maybe? Were they planning to invade your worlds? Except they're not very warlike that I can see.

All they're fighting for now is just to take their own land back. Can you tell me to my face . . . no, to *their* faces, that that's wrong?'

The two Rhumon said nothing more. As Jamie led the children out in silence he noticed the two Rhumon exchange uncertain glances. Had each seen in the other's face the first shadows of doubt?

Outside the Zarbi were called back from feeding.

'Mobile unit has located the source of the signal, Lon Captain,' Lieutenant Stroon announced crisply. 'They are proceeding on foot to make visual identification, a second unit is standing by to give support if required.'

Stroon does everything in that manner, thought Shallvar.

His uniform is immaculate, his military procedure straight 154

from the textbook. He’s also a very pious churchman and his loyalty to the throne and state is beyond question. I’ve seen him almost every day for a year and a half now. Why suddenly does he make me feel uncomfortable?'

'Thank you, Lieutenant, ' he replied. 'Any further idea if it’s theirs or ours? ' Stroon scanned the consoles and looked enquiringly at the communications chief, who shook his head.

'No, Lord Captain. The signal is still erratic, though becoming stronger. It appears to be moving slowly. We should have confirmation any moment . . . yes, coming through now. '

'Put it on speaker.'

The whispering voice of the scout could be heard.

'. . . moving down gully . . . only thing visible is one of those big beasts . . . Zarbi, the natives call them . . . uh, detector's pointing straight at it . . . can’t be source, can it?

Checking it with scope . . . signal's low down . . . there's something trailing from one of its feet. . . small strip of cloth, maybe. Nothing else I can see . . . following it along gully . . . what? The thing's just gone through a sort of door in the rock . . . can see lights inside ... it has closed right up behind it! You wouldn't know there was anything there at all now.'

'Order him to fall back quietly. They are to keep the place under observation but to take no other overt action until further orders,' Shallvar directed.

'Yes, Lord Captain. Shall I pass the coordinates to the Shipmaster for missile targeting?'

'No. If this is a secret refuge of the natives, as seems most likely, then the improvised nature of that tracer signal suggests they may be holding some of our missing soldiers in there. Alternatively, if it is the home of some . . .

unknown force, then we must preserve as much possible intact for later study. In either case the attack will have to be by ground troops — which I shall command personally!'

Seventeen

octor! Oh, it's so good to see you!' Victoria hardly D waited for the scout car to stop, but leapt out to hug the small figure in the baggy frock coat and trousers who was waiting for her in the Republican compound. He looked so homely and reassuring that she suddenly found herself crying on his shoulder.

'There now, it's all over,' he said gently.

'But what are you doing here? Are you a prisoner?' she asked, sniffing.

'No, I'm more of an inconvenient guest at the moment. I think I'm making some headway with these people, but it's rather uphill going. Nothing to the busy time you've been having, I understand.'

'I was trying to find you and Jamie, but it kept going wrong. I tried to be brave . . . but I was really terrified underneath.'

'Which is just what being brave is all about,' the Doctor reminded her.

'All the same, it might have been better if you'd stayed with the Menoptera.'

'You know I was with them?'

'Yes, Nallia told us.'

'Us. . . Oh, Jamie? Where is he?'

The Doctor lowered his voice slightly. 'We got separated, but I'm certain Nallia and her people got him away all right.

Well... fairly certain. Anyway, Jamie's big enough to look after himself. Meanwhile, let's get you tidied up and out of that costume. I rather think it's served its purpose, don't you?'

Victoria realized she must be a strange sight with the 156

headpiece of her disguise tucked under her arm, her partly made-up face, the microcamera unit still taped to her head and the heavy collar. The Doctor frowned at the collar.

'What's this thing?'

'Something Officer Nevon put on me. It gives you electric shocks if you don't behave.'

The Doctor's face seemed to pinch inward.

'So that's the "degree of coercion" Draga meant, is it?

Well we'll get that off you immediately' Relgo appeared, walking up to them quickly. 'About this thing -' the Doctor began angrily.

'Yes, I know. Please wait here and I'll fetch Nevon.'

The Doctor's eyes narrowed.

'Why can't we come into the ship?'

Relgo looked unhappy but steadfast.

'It is just a precaution. Quite without any official sanction, Officer Nevon installed an explosive device inside the collar.'

Victoria went white and clapped a hand to her neck. 'You mean a ... a bomb?'

'I destroyed the control trigger myself' Relgo explained quickly. 'It cannot simply go off. Believe me, we like this no more than you do.'

'I very much doubt it,' snapped the Doctor.

'Please, Doctor,' said Victoria faintly, 'can't you take it off? I don't want to have anything to do with that Nevon person ever again.'

'Of course. Will you bring the key, Officer Relgo?'

'Apparently there is none. It has to be disassembled in some specific manner - and unfortunately only Nevon knows how.'

'Then have a selection of suitable tools sent out. And we'll need a chair and table.'

'Yes, of course.' Relgo spoke into his communicator.

'And please call the Captain as well,' Victoria said. 'I've got something very important to tell her. Something that will upset Nevon, I think,' she added, with a flicker of defiant pleasure.

'I see.' Relgo used his wristband again. A chair and table were found and Victoria took a seat. The Doctor held her hand, which trembled slightly.

'Why don't you tell us what happened after you lost contact?' he suggested. Victoria was grateful for the distraction.

'Well, this awful collar kept on giving me shocks. It wouldn't stop. I opened the neck piece of my disguise and tried to hold it clear of my skin but it was too tight. I ran and ran, hoping to find help, not caring about being discovered any more, but there was nobody. I remember going through some heavy double doors. . . then I must have passed out.

'When I recovered my senses the pain had stopped. The Menoptera cowl had been removed, and I was in a sort of chapel with gold panels on the walls. A priest called Father Modeenus was tending me. He was very kind and didn't give me away to anybody else, because he'd recognized the spying devices and my collar and guessed Nevon was behind me being there. I don't think he likes her very much.'

'The last I believe, but the rest doesn't sound like Modeenus,' said

Relgo.

'Having had a taste of his hospitality, I must agree with you,' said the Doctor. 'Are you sure of his name, Victoria?'

'I'm certain. We talked for some time while I recovered.

That was when he told me about his revelation.'

'What?'

'A revelation. He said Omnimon - that's his God — had spoken to him while he had been praying in the chapel the other night. He told him to make peace between the Imperials and Republicans, and then there would be no need for them to stay on Vortis. He was very excited about it.'

She looked at Relgo, hesitated for a moment then continued.

'He gave me a note for Captain Draga. He said not to tell anyone else about it, especially Nevon, but I suppose —'

'Show me,' Relgo said.

Victoria pulled a folded slip of paper from the neck of her costume and handed it over. Relgo examined it closely.

'Looks like a list of times and communicator frequencies when Modeenus will be available.'

'That's so he and the Captain can talk secretly without his own commander knowing. And the Father also asked me to tell her about his revelation. He said it was very important.'

'I'm sure the Captain will hear you out,' Relgo confirmed,

'but I doubt any talk of "revelations" will impress her.'

'Well at least I would have done my best,' Victoria insisted stubbornly. 'Anything to stop this dreadful occupation.'

'Quite right too,' the Doctor agreed. 'Meanwhile, finish your story. How did you get away from the Imperial base?'

'That was easy. When I had got my strength back, Father Modeenus

found a strip of metal, lead I think, to stop the collar signals the way the walls of his chapel did, apparently, in case they gave me away or started the shocks again. And he gave me some water and a pack of their food in case I had to walk far. I put on my disguise again and he escorted me out of the ship and beyond the compound gates, so the guards wouldn't stop me. Then I simply walked away into the forest as though I was a Menoptera worker returning to her village. I took the metal strip off when I was well clear — very carefully in case the shocks started - and made contact again, and here I am.'

The tools arrived and the Doctor laid them out on the table. Removing the microcamera headband carefully and putting it aside, he examined Victoria's collar.

'Ah, yes... I see. The lock is rather like a tiny metal interlocking puzzle. Very ingenious, but quite solvable. I'll have you free in no time.' He began to work on the lock.

Out of the corner of her eye Victoria saw Draga approaching and was aware of the Doctor glowering at the Republican captain as he selected another tool.

'This is an evil thing to use,' he said flatly.

Draga literally looked crestfallen, Victoria thought, and momentarily seemed to find it hard to find a suitable response. But just as she opened her mouth the Doctor said quickly, 'On the other hand, I suppose you're not personally responsible, *Officer Relgo.'*

Draga was staring over her head at the Doctor in bewilderment, while Victoria was dumbstruck. Why was he speaking as though the captain was not there?

'Nevertheless I'm truly sorry, Doctor,' Relgo said deliberately, as though answering the Doctor's initial accusation.

Victoria felt tiny clicks as the Doctor rapidly manipulated the lock mechanism. She began to tremble again and found Relgo's hands holding her firmly. 'Perhaps the captain or Nevon will be along soon,' he continued in the same slightly forced tone, even as Draga watched on in silence not five yards away. 'I'm sure they'd like to apologize as well.'

'Well they needn't hurry. This will take me some time to .

. .' There was a sudden click, the collar came free and the Doctor tore it from her neck. Victoria's vision blurred and she thought she was going to faint with relief When it sharpened again she saw the Doctor standing before her holding the collar, together with a small black rectangular sliver with minute tracery etched across it.

'A sound trigger,' he explained, 'inserted in the detonator mechanism. No doubt set to react the moment it detected Draga's, or perhaps Nevon's, voice pattern. A backup in case Modeenus couldn't tell if the targets were in range through the audiovisual link, which he's no doubt tuned into. He must have discovered the explosive device while you were unconscious and decided to turn it to his advantage.' The Doctor grinned suddenly. 'It's a good thing I removed the headset first, isn't it?' Victoria nodded weakly.

The Doctor picked up the tiny camera and pointed it at himself.

'You'll have to do better than that,' he said, then deliberately smashed the device against the table.

* * *

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Modeenus sat back from his altar console with a grunt of annoyance as the screen flashed into a blaze of static and then went dead. Well, it had been worth the effort, but clearly Omnimon in his wisdom had determined that the unbelievers should live a little longer. No doubt some more fitting fate was arranged for them. The Doctor creature especially. He regretted most the effort he had put into nattering the sensibilities of the alien woman. He'd even had to touch her . . . He'd washed his hands several times after she'd left, of course, but he thought he could still smell her disturbing scent in the chapel. Ironically, if she had died as he had intended, she would have been spiritually cleansed by serving as the tool of the One Path. As cleansed as a woman could be, anyway. Yes, perhaps that was why he had failed. She had been judged as unworthy even to be used as a tool.

It was possible the Reps would think Shallvar instigated the failed assassination attempt - a misconception that did not trouble Modeenus. The sad fact was that Shallvar did not have the will to do such a thing, and he was beginning to wonder if Shallvar was even worthy of his position. He let mere domestic matters disturb him, judging from the vidigrams he had viewed from that undisciplined wife of his. Still, he might yet prove himself in this present operation

against the natives.

Modeenus lowered and locked the altar top once more, concealing the console hidden within. A chapel was more than a place to communicate with God: it was a priest's link with the Holy City on Rhumos. The gold-plated lead panels on the walls assured him of appropriate privacy, and only through the altar unit's buried aerials could signals enter or leave the chamber. With creatures like Nevon opposing them, the modern priest had to be pragmatic about such matters.

But, despite the chapel's shielding, Omnimon had genuinely spoken to him, as he had told the alien girl, though in fact the revelation only confirmed what he had half suspected for some time. He, Modeenus, was the 161

only truly worthy servant of Omnimon on the whole planet.

'You're just the same as your Imperial relations,' the Doctor said, indicating with a sweep of his hand the entire Republican base.

They were back in the conference room. Victoria, still in the remains of her disguise and feeling numb after her ordeal, sat beside him. Opposite them were Draga and Relgo, who bristled visibly at the accusation.

'We are not here to be insulted, Doctor,' Draga replied stiffly. 'Your actions have earned our gratitude, but not the right to make foolish and invidious comparisons. We are here to discuss the matter of these grey creatures you claim to have encountered, and whether they have any connection with our missing compeers, nothing more.'

'But don't you see,' the Doctor pleaded, 'that while you are divided between yourselves and the Menoptera, you cannot take effective action against these creatures or even find out how widespread they are? On your own admission they may have been active for some months, but to be certain you must have the undivided cooperation of all concerned. To do that the differences between you must be resolved so that the occupation can end.'

Relgo laughed dryly.

'Just like that, eh, Doctor? You think you can end over a hundred and fifty years of war and confrontation all by yourself'

'I can try,' the Doctor replied stoutly. 'You've never had an

independent third party to mediate between you before.

But the first thing to do is make you realize how alike your two cultures really are. After all, you are of the same race and come from the same planet originally.'

'That is all that links us, Doctor,' Draga said heavily. 'We broke free from the Imperial regime when the colony world of New Rhumos fought for and won its independence. The old ways were corrupt, but we built something' - she paused

- 'not perfect perhaps, but

better. And over the years this divergence has been proven to exist. We are divided by our beliefs and there is no turning back, whatever physical similarities remain.'

'Ah, yes, the analyser tests. I was wondering when we'd get to them. You set such great store by their results, don't you? So does Father Modeenus. Even your weapons systems employ similar principles.'

'Exactly. And the fact that they work, distinguishing Imperial from Republican, is proof enough that a fundamental difference in mental and moral states does exist,'

Relgo pointed out.

'But that is simply impossible!' the Doctor said fiercely.

'A hundred and fifty years is just not long enough for such a divergence to manifest itself in a detectable manner, solely due to the influence of abstract mind sets. There must be another explanation.' He rubbed his chin, scowling in thought. 'I wonder, could I examine your analyser machine?

I want to be sure it functions on the same principles as the Imperial model.'

'I believe you mean well, Doctor,' said Draga, 'but it is pointless. You cannot bridge such a divide, and while it exists we must each hold our positions on this world. Our soldiers are tired - it may be of little worth to continue; but even if we could leave here tomorrow we would not.

Neither Shallvar nor myself are free in this matter, and, while that indisputable difference remains, shaping all our lives, so do we.' She allowed her words to sink in, then continued in a brisker manner. 'Now shall we discuss how to determine the nature and purpose of these grey creatures?'

Just then Nevon entered the room.

Victoria gave a little gasp and shrank away from her.

Draga looked at Nevon angrily.

'I told you to stay out of my sight, Officer Nevon.'

'Perhaps she's come to apologize to Victoria,' the Doctor suggested.

Nevon almost sneered.

'Apologize for what, alien? It was necessary. This is not an honourable war - such things belong in feudal 163

myths. An opportunity arose to eliminate a key opponent by using a third party of no value and without risk to Republican forces. As you saw, they would do the same to us.'

'Nevertheless, you exceeded your authority by not consulting me first,' Draga warned her. 'I will report that.'

'As I will report your words just now, Captain. Ah, you look surprised, but of course I have been monitoring your conversation - it is my job. And I have every sentence recorded and safely filed away. They demonstrate how these Imperial lackeys have corrupted your thinking!'

'Oh, so we're Imperial agents are we?' said the Doctor.

'Well, we'd better let the analyser prove it. You do believe in the analyser, don't you?'

'Naturally'

'Then you won't mind giving a demonstration. I'm sure you're an expert in interpreting its results. I take it you examined Victoria when you first found her?'

'Yes, of course —'

'But obviously she didn't register as a fanatical Imperialist then, did she, or you would hardly have risked using her.'

'No. Your alien mind patterns give . . . indeterminate readings.'

'But now you imply Victoria is an Imperial agent. Has she been corrupted while she was in their base?' He turned to Draga. 'Perhaps we should find out. It might be important.'

'It cannot do any harm,' she agreed.

The analyser was housed in an anteroom of the ship's main laboratory. The Doctor fussed over it, examining the test chamber and the displays carefully.

'Yes, almost identical to the Imperial model.'

'Why not? They stole the design from us,' Relgo said.

'And they probably say the same thing about you. Never mind. Hop in, Victoria.'

'Must I, Doctor?'

'Please. You know it doesn't hurt and it might prove very interesting.'

Reluctantly, Victoria stepped into the cubical and the transparent tube closed about her. Nevon worked the controls. The lights pulsed, the device buzzed shrilly and she covered her ears. After a minute it was done. As the tube slid up to release Victoria, Nevon scanned the jagged graph lines displayed on the screen over Victoria's original set and pointed triumphantly.

'There, alien! See the difference in those peaks? An altered emotional bias towards subordination, superstition and social differentiation. Classic Imperial tendencies. They were not present in the original scan, see for yourself!'

The Doctor blinked at the display for a moment nonplussed, comparing the two clearly distinct traces. Then he turned to Victoria, still clad in her disordered Menoptera disguise, her hand pressed to her mouth in dismay.

'Have you brought anything from the Imperial base with you?'

'No . . . this is what I went in. Oh, except this.' She pulled the remains of the emergency rations Modeenus had given her from its resting place inside the headpiece, which she had unconsciously been carrying like a misshapen handbag.

The Doctor took it from her curiously. It was a plain transparent pack holding compressed bars of food in closed pockets, with a small bubble of coloured pills attached. The pills seemed to interest him.

'Do you know what these are?' he asked the others.

'Of course,' Nevon sniffed. 'They are Imperial food additives. They feed their underclass so badly they are needed to maintain their health.'

'Do you have something similar?'

'We provide essential minerals to maintain the health of all at maximum efficiency.'

'Of course - though a different formula, I suspect.'

'A superior one.'

The Doctor's eyes glittered and he beamed broadly, his strongly lined jowls bunching, putting Victoria in mind of an amiable intellectual basset hound. 'Go back into the test chamber again, please, Victoria,' he said in such an easy yet compelling tone that she did so.

'Run the test once more, Nevon — please don't argue!'

Even Nevon felt his power - a momentary certainty that was greater than her own — and she obeyed automatically.

As the lights flashed and the sound rose Victoria heard the Doctor say, 'Watch those three markers. I think you'll find Victoria's readings are now back to what they were before.

But then she hasn't got the Imperial mineral tablets in there with her this time.'

Draga said brokenly, 'You can't be suggesting . . . no!'

'That your two societies have been divided on the basis of a trivial difference in diet? Look at the graphs - they prove it!'

The analyser powered down. Victoria slipped out of the tube as soon as it allowed to find the three Rhumon still frozen to the spot, all staring at the jagged lines on the screen.

'I told Modeenus,' the Doctor continued relentlessly, 'that I didn't believe such a machine could read mind patterns.

Those few peaks and ridges are the only significant difference between Republican and Imperial Rhumon. At some time in the past, I suspect, a biased experimenter must have decided they indicated loyalty to one side or another.

Normally such a ridiculous suggestion would never have remained unchallenged for long, but it was politically so useful in promoting the artificial differences between you that it eventually became accepted as fact by both sides.

'But all it means is that your bodies contain slightly different proportions of minor trace elements, well within your natural limits. When it analysed us or the Menoptera it detected very real differences from the Rhumon norm of course, including variance in those key trace mineral readings. But then we really are different races, so that is to be expected. The integral analyser readings are sufficient to sensitize your weapons systems to discriminate between an Imperial and Republican Rhumon, but that trivial distinction is utterly meaningless in terms of social orientation or philosophical belief He placed the Imperial mineral tablets in Nevon's unresisting gloved

hand. 'But if you don't believe me, test these yourself, then compare them with a batch of your own pills. It's as simple as that.'

There was a long silence in the room.

Draga and Relgo exchanged confused, disbelieving glances. Nevon stared at the coloured tablets in her palm, then slowly tipped them onto the floor where they bounced away. When she raised her head there was an unnaturally distant look in her eyes which did not seem to focus on the Doctor's face.

'Lies, all lies. An Imperial plot to negate the revolution,'

she said jerkily. 'I do not need to make any tests to know this. I instruct you all not to know this. All food pills will be confiscated so they cannot he. I, I. . . am going to seek further directions. The

revolution shall be reborn. A new order . . .'

She left the room walking like an automaton.

'Well,' said the Doctor, clasping his hands together and smiling brightly. 'I think you should put a call through to Lord Shallvar now, don't you? There's a demonstration I'd like to make using his integral analyser — if you could lend me some of your own mineral supplement tablets before Nevon confiscates them all. And it would also be wise if he checked his war graves, don't you think?'

Draga looked at Relgo, who nodded. Two minutes later she established contact with the Imperial Base.

But Shallvar was unavailable.

Eighteen

here were no alarms rung, no shouting or outward Tpanic. Jamie simply noticed figures moving more hastily past the alcove in which he and Yostor were resting.

Lightly stepping Menoptera half gliding, stocky Optera travelling in their awkward shuffling hop, half a dozen Zarbi waddling by, together with larvae grubs gliding along on many rippling legs, their long snouts weaving from side to side. Yostor's antenna twitched. Nallia appeared in the alcove arch, buckling on her gun holster.

'It has started,' she said simply.

'What?' Jamie asked.

'The evacuation. The lookouts on the summit have seen troops approaching: Imperial they think. Somehow they have found us. There are signs they are surrounding the base on foot, trying to take us unawares. We must fly — do not be alarmed, we shall take you with us.'

'But you're not going to let them take this place without a fight?'

'No. A rear guard will attempt to delay them, giving the two main bodies time to get clear. One is bound for another refuge we had prepared against this eventuality; the other will try to take the children across the cleared zone to the free lands beyond. It is a long

and dangerous journey. The invaders have set up remote radar scanners to detect such movement across the seas and flatlands. We can only hope they are not intercepted.'

Jamie picked up a loaded basket and Yostor did the same.

'We're ready for them,' said Jamie.

'What of the prisoners?' Yostor asked.

'We cannot be burdened with more wingless than we must. They shall remain.'

'They might still be useful if we have to bargain with either side,' Jamie suggested. 'Maybe we can -'

There was a rumble that shook the cave, dislodging dust from the roof, and the pressure wave of an explosion made Jamie's ears pop. Distant cries echoed through the galleries, together with the zip and whine of energy weapons.

'They have broken in already!' Nallia gasped.

They ran towards the sound of battle.

The cave opening out from the main entrance was half filled with smoke. The heavy pivoting door itself was shattered into a thousand pieces. Imperial troops were battling inwards, tossing grenades before them. Nallia immediately joined the other Menoptera, who were firing down from the ramps and galleries leading out of the chamber.

For the first time Jamie realized the larvae grubs' long snouts were living weapons which hissed and spat something that had Imperial soldiers toppling to the ground, uniforms smoldering. He saw Zarbi rushing forward, their sheer bulk and weight sending men reeling, and snapping at arms with their powerful mandibles. But still the soldiers advanced into the cavern over the bodies of friend and foe alike. Slowly the defenders were pressed back. A gap opened.

'Right, let them have it!' he called to Yostor, and threw the first of the somlos berries from his basket, taking care not to split its skin. It struck an Imperial soldier in the chest, purple juice splattering across his tunic. The man took two puzzled steps forward, clawed at his throat, then fell over.

Jamie yelled in delight and threw another charge of natural sleeping gas into the enemy ranks. Its effects were relatively localized as the juice soaked away quickly into sand and fabric, but it was an unexpected hindrance that disorganized the advance, keeping them penned into the entrance cave.

Seeing this the defenders redoubled their efforts. They were going to push them back!

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A drifting cinder stung Jamie's cheek and he realized the air was filling with smoke. Grenades and high-intensity energy beams had set the lantern ivy and moss beds alight.

Walls and seating alcoves began to burn. The heat caused the air to swirl in a new direction, bringing a whiff of sweet vapour back towards the defenders' ranks.

'Everybody back!' he shouted.

They retreated, leaving the cavern to the reeling and confused invaders. At least the berries had slowed down the advance. He hoped the others they had placed earlier would do the same. Then came another explosion from a tunnel to their right. Through a fresh billow of smoke a handful of Menoptera appeared firing back the way they had come.

'They have blasted a second entrance!' one of them called out.

'Have you seen my father?' Nallia asked.

'Holding the next level until the children are safely away.'

'No! He must lead the party to the new refuge. I must find him. Is everybody else clear?' 'We think so.' 'Then come with me!'

They headed for the nearest ramp to the second level. A couple of Optera joined them, brandishing their long digging spikes fiercely, as though still eager to fight. They reached the ramp's foot and started up, the faster Menoptera in the lead.

From above came cries of alarm and flashes from a string of rapid explosions. Smoke billowed and stone ground on stone. Then the roof caved in with a booming rush carrying all before it. An avalanche of dust and boulders sent them leaping backwards, stumbling and falling.

Scrabbling clear on hands and knees Jamie saw hard-shelled Menoptera bodies twisted and split open and glittering wings crushed and buried under the rubble. Gradually the noise faded away, leaving the ramp to the second level choked with tons of debris. Ears ringing,

wiping dust from his eyes, he picked himself up, still clutching his basket in which two somlos berries remained miraculously intact. Who had survived? He saw Nallia helping Yostor to his feet, each now with a crumpled wing and obviously unfit to fly for the moment. The two Optera were probing the ruins for life, but nothing moved. Imperial gunfire sounded louder. Nallia looked upward despairingly as though her gaze could penetrate the solid rock.

'My father . . . the children . . .'

'We can't help them anymore,' said Jamie firmly, 'now we've got to look to ourselves. Which way do we go?'

'The central chamber,' said Nallia with an obvious effort.

'There is another exit from there, a small tunnel. But it only leads to the outside.'

'Better than being caught in here.'

They ran back into the smoke, racing to get to the chamber before they were cut off. Jamie had a nightmare vision of being trapped in the darkness of the tunnels with the natural lights all burnt out, choking slowly to death.

They heard voices shouting in Rhumon as they approached and hesitated before they realized they were the prisoners'.

Dashing into the chamber they found the smoke was thicker and scattered fires were already burning about the walls.

'We can't leave them,' said Jamie simply.

'No,' agreed Nallia, heading for the side cave while removing a key from her belt. The coughing prisoners looked at her through streaming frightened eyes. She unlocked their cage doors and flung them wide.

'Out,' she commanded. 'Your kind will find you soon.'

'Who?' asked Annolos anxiously. 'Imperials.'

Annolos smiled uncertainly; Torth frowned and shook his head. 'Not for me. I'll take a chance on getting out of here.'

'Well follow us, then,' Jamie snapped, 'but no trouble, mind!'

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The group stumbled across the cavern to an incon-spicuous cleft in the far wall, half hidden by a projecting rib of rock.

'Good luck,' Annolos said to Torth quickly, as they began to squeeze though the aperture. Torth grinned back at him wryly, then suddenly extended a hand for him to clasp. As he did so energy beams cut through the smoke and almost struck Annolos. Instinctively Torth grabbed his arm and jerked him forward and they both scraped through into the narrow tunnel beyond.

"Trigger-happy lot of yours,' Torth said, scrambling after the rest. 'Maybe you'd better choose your moment to show yourself.' Annolos followed helplessly after him. In the near pitch-darkness ahead Nallia pushed at a rock sealing the end of the tunnel. Jamie got up beside her and added his shoulder.

'Outside we just run fast and silent for the nearest cover,'

he grunted.

The plug of rock fell away and daylight shone upon them.

They piled out of the crimped tunnel mouth and dropped a few feet onto the sandy floor of a narrow cleft.

'This way,' said Nallia, and they headed along the path.

Around a corner they came across three Imperial soldiers sprawled in the ashy soil. Purple stains splashed up their boots.

'Keep to the side and hold your breath,' Jamie said with a wild grin at Yostor. The somlos berries they had buried earlier had obviously worked just as they planned. But as they passed the unconscious figures he saw Annolos and Torth stoop quickly and snatch up fallen rifles. Jamie cursed his carelessness. Were they going to give trouble? For a tense moment they stared at each other, but the two men kept their guns low. A tentative unspoken understanding was reached and they ran on together. The sound of battle continued over their heads but for the moment the meandering rock cleft was a haven of peace. If

we can only get through the Imperial lines, Jamie thought, we still have a chance.

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Nallia stopped abruptly and pointed upwards. A small host of flying figures were spiraling up from the summit of the mount into the purple star-spangled sky and striking out and away. The tracer beams of gunfire from the ground followed them. Even as they looked on helplessly, a small figure dropped back from the rest and began a long spiral to earth.

'No ... the children!'

Jamie grabbed her arm.

'We can't help them now. We've got to keep going.'

Nallia nodded dumbly and they continued on. Almost ignored by the rest, Annolos and Torth brought up the rear.

They glanced up at the sky and then at each other.

Half a mile from the base of the mount the cleft became shallower and opened into a tiny amphitheatre, dotted with clumps of dry scrub. Nallia raised her pistol. In the middle of the depression sat an Imperial transporter, its driver standing on its roof staring in the direction of the battle. To one side they saw the head of a guard patrolling the rock shelf overlooking the basin. Jamie's eyes gleamed. Ever since he saw Coroth handling the stolen halftrack he'd wondered what it would be like to drive one. With both Nallia and Yostor injured, plus the two wingless Optera, it would be quicker than walking. He felt Annolos grasp his arm and looked into the troubled eyes of the Imperial technician.

'I won't let you hurt them,' he said.

'No need,' Jamie grinned. 'Besides, that would make too much noise.'

He hefted his remaining somlos berries carefully, then rose up and threw one at the driver. It struck the man full in the chest with a slight plop. He had time enough for one brief gasp of surprise before toppling forward, sliding down the angled windscreen and dropping to the soft ground with a thud. The guard on the ridge turned at the sound, took a curious step forward and received the same treatment. He fell with a slight clatter. From somewhere out of sight came a cry

of surprise.

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Within ten seconds they had piled inside the vehicle, Jamie at the controls. Now what had Coroth done? Throw that switch, grasp the steering yoke, foot on that pedal. . .

They jerked backwards.

'Select forward!' Annolos shouted from the rear seat.

'What are you still doing here?' Jamie snapped in surprise, twisting a handle the other way. 'You could have stayed with your own people.' They lurched forward, bounced off a rock and weaved away down a broader ravine, shots following after them. 'Well it's too late now.'

'I know,' said Annolos bleakly.

Shallvar examined the burnt-out Menoptera base by the light of hand torches. With considerable losses they had won themselves scorched tunnels and blasted piles of rock.

The lingering sweet scent in the air reminded him they had also been tricked badly. The natives had never used chemical weapons before, even non-lethal ones like these, and they had been caught unprepared. The scent mingled unpleasantly with smoke and burnt flesh. The first major confrontation with the natives for almost a year and it had not gone well.

They found a room containing cages. It was burnt out but at least no Rhumon remains could be seen. Had they taken their prisoners with them? A way was cleared to the upper levels. Bodies of the enemy and their creatures lay intermingled with Imperial corpses: honest blood mingling with alien body fluids.

But they had fought hard, he could not deny them that.

Then Shallvar came upon a small still figure lying within a halo of crumpled sparkling wings and stopped dead.

Somehow he had not even considered the possibility they would have had children here. Curse them! What had they fought so hard for? he wondered angrily. Then he realized the answer was lying before him. He felt sick and it took a supreme effort of will to control his stomach. Woodenly he turned away and marched out.

Nineteen

m tired of waiting around,' Victoria said grumpily.

'I'You can't hurry these things,' the Doctor reminded her.

They were making yet another circuit of the compound, watching the setting of the Rhumon system over the distant craggy hills. The Republicans had provided her with a tunic top and odd loose-fitting trousers to replace her disguise, so at least she felt more comfortable. She had also snatched a few hours' sleep and Nevon seemed to be staying out of their way. But she was aware of an uneasy air about the base, and Draga and Relgo had been in conference with their senior officers for several hours.

'What can they be talking about all this time?' she wondered.

'Loss of confidence,' said the Doctor sadly. 'I rather suspect this last year on Vortis has already strained their loyalty to the revolutionary cause, which they have been taught to believe in as absolutely and unquestioningly as the Imperial side believe in their Emperor and religion. And now I have removed one of its cornerstones.'

'But just what was this "revolution" of theirs about?'

The Doctor's manner became wise and scholarly.

'Of course, communism had not developed seriously when you left Earth. Well, their principle doctrine is probably the common ownership of the means of production...' Victoria looked mystified and the Doctor smiled.

'Putting it simply, they think everybody should be treated absolutely equally, and that the state should own and run everything for the benefit of the people as a whole.'

Victoria frowned. 'Well, it doesn't sound bad, I suppose.'

'It isn't in small doses, but it ignores the human, or for that matter Rhumon, factor. People don't fit exactly into any one category or ideal. They are too diverse and it's impossible for them to be truly equal. Unfortunately the only way such a system works is if everybody

follows the rules rigidly. It doesn't allow for much self-criticism, and any dissenters are hounded by people like Nevon and the whole structure becomes unbalanced. The only reason it has held together so long here is that they've been exactly matched by the Imperials' extreme monarchistic hierarchy. But now the equilibrium has been disturbed.'

'Everybody equal,' Victoria mused, looking at the native water carriers and the labourers on the wall. 'But they don't treat the Menoptera equally, do they?'

'That's because they assume the system cannot be wrong, therefore everybody else must be. Some people, you see, are more equal than others.'

Relgo's voice came over the loudspeakers.

'Will the Doctor and Victoria Waterfield come to the conference room immediately'

'I think we've got a reply,' the Doctor said brightly.

Shallvar's image on the screen remained impassive as the Doctor explained why he wanted to return to the Imperial base, then replied simply, 'Very well, I will see this demonstration of yours, Doctor. Afterwards I will consider your peculiar request that the graves of our war dead be examined. A vehicle will be waiting in the buffer zone crater in one standard hour. I guarantee your safe conduct.

Shallvar, commanding Imperial Expeditionary force, out.'

The screen blanked.

'He seemed preoccupied,' Relgo observed. 'Probably about his latest sortie,' Draga said. 'Maybe it's not going too well.'

'What's happened?' Victoria asked uneasily.

'Our scouts report some fighting on the far edge of the 176

buffer zone. No threat to us. Probably he's moving against the native resistance.'

Victoria looked alarmed. The Doctor comforted her.

'Don't worry. I'm sure Jamie's all right.'

Jamie had discovered that driving, though exhilarating, was not as easy as it looked. But despite the obvious anxieties of his passengers he was determined not to relinquish the controls until he had mastered the skill. There was nothing a McCrimmon could not do if he set his mind to it, he told himself. So they plunged erratically onward through twisting canyons and spurs of thicker forest, with the occasional rock or tree rebounding from the vehicle's armoured sides and its occupants clinging tightly to their seats. After several bone-shaking miles, and with no sign of pursuit, Jamie slowed their pace slightly and asked Nallia,

'Where should we be headed? Towards this new base of yours?'

'We dare not go there until we are certain we are not being followed.' She looked across at the two Rhumon soldiers. 'And until we've decided what to do with them.'

Jamie could see her point. Both men had refrained from using their newly acquired weapons on each other or their former captors; though the fact that Morg and Zenor, the two Optera, were still clutching their digging spars purposefully and regarding them with obvious suspicion may have had something to do with this reticence. In glances he had snatched as they travelled, Jamie thought both Rhumon looked guilty rather than dangerous, though about what he could not imagine.

'Let us find harder ground to disguise our tracks, then some place to halt for a while,' Nallia suggested. 'It may be best to walk to the new base and leave them to do what they wish with the vehicle.'

'Aye, that makes sense,' Jamie agreed, though secretly he was unhappy at the thought of abandoning their transport just when he was getting the hang of driving.

They were passing along a broad, crater-pitted valley, with typical sheer-sided walls. Night had fallen and the 177

fringes of vegetation that skirted the cliffs were full of deep shadows. Jamie edged a little closer to the nearest wall looking for a suitable shelter.

'See,' said Yostor suddenly, 'faint tracks running along the edge of the trees. Many vehicles have been this way'

Jamie could only just make them out, but did not doubt the Menoptera's more sensitive eyes and familiarity with the conditions.

'What have you got out here?' he asked the two soldiers. They looked at each other in obvious surprise and shook their heads.

'This is still the buffer zone, isn't it?' Torth said. 'There's no camp that I know of.'

'Same for us,' said Annolos.

'The tracks have disappeared,' said Yostor. Jamie quickly threw the transporter into reverse and backed up until Yostor pointed. 'There, they turn into that cleft.'

A narrow rift: split the cliff face. It was half choked with rock ivy and its base almost smothered in giant multicoloured ferns.

'There's hardly room to pass,' said Jamie.

'The plants make it seem narrower than it is,' Nallia observed.

'Well, it would make a fine place to hide,' Jamie agreed,

'even if we only go in a wee way. But what if there's somebody in there?'

Nallia had been scrutinizing the marks closely. 'They look worn and old,' she announced. 'I think nothing has been this way for some time. We may take the risk.'

Jamie edged the transporter forward. Ferns brushed past the cabin windows and the webwork of ivy trailed overhead.

Beyond, the cleft widened slightly, though it was still deep in shadow, with only a brilliant ribbon of stars overhead for illumination. Nevertheless Jamie felt it best not to use the headlights. After a hundred yards or so the cleft opened abruptly and they found themselves rolling into a shadowy steep-sided crater. More rock ivy festooned its walls, while across its floor were dotted growths like giant, half-erupted fungi. Jamie circled around and brought them to a halt 178

between the far wall and a thick fern bush, so they were concealed from the crater's entrance.

'Well this is snug enough,' he declared, turning off the power. They climbed down from the transporter, looking about with interest. Yostor peered at the ground intently and began walking slowly

forward. Nallia wandered away towards the nearest of the ground plants. Morg and Zenor kept a watchful eye over Annolos and Torth. Jamie also turned to the soldiers, looking at their rifles, then into their eyes.

'Right, we can talk plainly here. As long as you don't intend to follow us, you're free to make your own ways home and tell whatever story you like about how bravely you escaped just before the raid and there'll be none to gainsay you. So, what will it be?' The two looked uncertainly back at him, but before they could respond, Yostor called out, 'Over here. I have found something.'

They all crossed to where he was standing before an ivy-shrouded expanse of crater wall with a clear patch of ground before it. Yostor pointed. The soil was grooved with track marks right up to the wall, similar to those they had first seen, but undeniably sharper and fresher.

'I begin to think,' Yostor said softly, 'that the tracks outside were brushed over to conceal them. Some of these marks can only be days old.'

Jamie felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise and glanced swiftly round the silent shadowed crater before his eyes came to rest on the wall before them once again. The ivy hung across it like a net. He stepped closer. No, it had been woven *about* a net! He tugged it aside. Beyond it the crater wall hollowed out in a niche, curtained by the ivy.

Within were the dim shapes of eight battered and scarred Rhumon vehicles lined up side by side. Halftracks, scout cars, even a modified truck like the one they had taken when they escaped from the Imperial camp with Coroth.

Like? He peered closer. The windscreen was broken in a familiar pattern . . . Annolos and Torth were by his side, equally astonished.

'Every car we've ever lost,' Annolos breathed.

'And most of ours too, I reckon,' Torth confirmed. 'But what are they doing here?'

'We did not take them,' Nallia said simply. 'And there is something else.' She led them back out onto the crater floor and pointed. 'Yostor,

have you ever seen plants like those on Vortis in all your long years?'

The old Menoptera looked at them intently, then declared,

'No, Daughter of Krestus, I have not.'

Each was about three feet across and five high, with dark wrinkled skins pleated vertically like bellows. The earth about their bases was disturbed, as though pushed aside by their growth. Now Jamie realized why he had thought them fungi. They were arranged in almost perfect fairy rings, eight in all, with six of the growths to each ring. In the centre of each circle was a slight depression, as though the ground had sunk into an old excavation. Hesitantly he stretched out a hand and touched the nearest growth. It felt coarse, like damp unpolished leather. Then, even as his hand trailed across it, the sides of the growth swelled outward, pulsing twice in a slow rhythm, and the whole thing rocked as though something had shifted within it.

Jamie leapt backwards with a curse, heart pounding.

'Did you see that? They're alive!'

Even as they took in his words another pod in the adjacent ring also trembled. Jamie's mind leapt to a frightening conjecture.

'I know what's in them . . . grey beasts!'

'What?' exclaimed Torth.

'Abominations. . . killers! This is where they come from.'

Annolos and Torth looked at him uncertainly, holding their rifles at the ready. They didn't fully comprehend, but they could recognize genuine alarm. 'Blasting holes won't stop them. We need fire. That's it! Bum them before they hatch out. Is there anything in the carriage that will do as kindling?'

'Emergency flares,' Annolos suggested, even as a pod rocked back and forth beside him, and another pulsed eerily.

They looked about them, skin crawling in horror.

The shadows in the crater began to shimmer with the twitches and jerks of burgeoning life.

'Too late, I fear,' Nallia hissed. 'Move away slowly.' Even the Rhumon soldiers understood and obeyed, keeping as far from the restless pods as possible. Edging clear of the last ring they ran for the transporter, pushing through the clump of ferns and reaching for the side hatches.

Then Jamie, his foot in the stirrup below the driver's door, said urgently, 'Hush. Listen!'

A soft echoing whine, together with a crunching of gravel, was growing in volume - the unmistakable sound of a moving vehicle. But there was no source to it. None of the salvaged collection had stirred and nothing was visible in the dark slash of the entrance cleft.

'Ghosts . . .' Annolos breathed.

Then ivy trailing across the crater wall to their left was brushed aside, the whine suddenly grew louder and a battered Republican scout car appeared from the mouth of a dark tunnel and drew up beside the rings of quivering pods.

But it was an Imperial soldier who stepped stiffly down from the cabin and strode to the centre of the field of pods that quivered ever more urgently with awakening alien life.

There he stood motionless, expectant, apparently infinitely patient. Unconsciously, the watchers held their breath.

There was a crisp tearing sound and the rustle of a dried husk falling away. A pod had split open close to them and a figure rose slowly from the remains. It was no grey beast, but a Republican soldier - a woman in complete battledress.

Annolos jammed a knuckle into his mouth to stifle a whimper.

A pod in the same ring split and a second figure emerged.

It was another Republican female soldier wearing identical battledress. As she stood at a slightly different angle from the first, it could be seen she had a large blackened scar on her midriff. Jamie became aware that Annolos was trembling violently. Torth, tearing his gaze from the frightening, fascinating spectacle before them, 181

grasped the younger man's arm to steady him. A third figure and a fourth bunt free from the ring. As far as they could see each was perfectly identical to the first.

Jamie knew he would carry the scene in that starlit crater under the multicoloured moons of Vortis with him to his dying day.

As though obeying some inaudible summons, pods all over the crater were splitting open and disgorging their macabre harvest. And it seemed each ring brought forth its own: six identical copies of Rhumon warriors of both camps. Each, as far as the watchers could tell, displaying the same details of uniform, each bearing the same scars and wounds. But all moving in total silence without apparent discomfort.

And then the last one had emerged and there were forty-eight newly formed beings standing erect on the crater floor amid the remains of the pods that had born them. Again, without any recognizable signal, the replicas moved, forming into neat files and marching towards the lone scout car. Its driver opened the rear hatch and, as each unit of six identical beings presented itself, he silently handed them lectrorifles and bandoliers of grenades. As each unit was armed it marched back across the crater to the rank of concealed vehicles. The camouflage netting was torn down and they began to climb aboard.

As the last unit collected its weapons and set off towards the vehicles, Jamie began to breathe again. It looked as though they were all going to leave the crater, which was fine by him. Then the unit stopped dead, still twenty yards short of the vehicle rank. There was a pause and then, with unnatural synchronization, they turned as one being, raised their rifles and fired straight at them.

The clump of fem shrivelled into flame. Jamie and the others scrambled into the transporter as shots pinged against its hull and blasted a scorched star in the armoured glass of a window. Even as he turned on the engines Annolos leant forward past him and threw a switch on the control panel.

Protective louvred shutters snapped down over the cabin windows. Jamie sent the vehicle surging forward in a spray 182

of sand and dust, swinging it about towards the cleft in the wall and the open canyon beyond.

A line of salvaged vehicles surged forward from their hiding place to block their path.

Desperately Jamie swung them round in a circle looking for another way out. Shots exploded against the hull and they were rocked by the blast of a high-intensity grenade.

The rest of the patched and scarred fleet closed in, trying to ram them. Armour boomed and grated against armour as they bounced off. Nevertheless Jamie knew it was only a matter of time before they were trapped.

Torth had been scrabbling in a locker in the back of the transporter. Now he shouted, 'Drive into the tunnel the scout car came out of! I've got an idea!' Jamie didn't know what he had in mind, but he could think of nothing better to do so he obeyed. Rebounding from an enemy halftrack, he drove recklessly at the tunnel mouth, scraping through with a shriek of metal, snapping on the headlamps to reveal a long smooth bore stretching away in a slight curve into the darkness. Torth opened the rear hatch of the transporter, tossed something out then slammed it tight again.

'Keep going!' he yelled.

Five seconds later there was a flash and roar from the tunnel mouth. Jamie felt the blast wave whistle past the transporter as though it was a ball in a musket barrel, and the vehicle surged forward with it. The boom and rumble of falling rocks took longer to subside. A pall of dust rolled past them and settled over the tunnel floor. Gradually Jamie brought them to a halt and they all peered back the way they'd come. Nothing was visible but a wall of fallen boulders through a haze of dust and smoke.

'Well, at least I've protected our backs,' Torth said simply.

'Aye,' Jamie agreed. 'Now all we have to worry about is what's at our front!'

It was the last thing Shallvar wanted to see right now, but nevertheless the 'Personal Message' signal was flashing on 183

his private console indicating that another vidigram from home awaited him. He resolutely ignored it until he had bathed and changed. He wanted to be rid of his battledress with the lingering stink of smoke. He should have eaten, but at that moment he could not face food. It was not until Cansonn had poured him a goblet of warming and very fine akrivat and departed to take his uniform for cleaning, that he felt capable of viewing Arleene's latest communication.

He saw at once that it had been recorded on their bedroom vidi. It was not by chance, perhaps, that a copy of their formal wedding portrait was prominent in the corner of the screen while she spoke.

Arleene looked achingly beautiful in a light wrap with her face devoid of cosmetics.

But her expression was pained and she kept smoothing her hand delicately over her crests as she spoke to indicate her troubled feelings, clearly presenting the 'more in sorrow than in anger' response to his recent forthright line.

'Kai,' she said faintly. 'It's taken me days to find the strength to reply. Your last message was so . . . brutish, that it quite shocked me. I should be at a reception at Lenorrta's tonight, but I couldn't let people see me in this state. I'll just stay home and keep my misery to myself.' She sniffed, then went on resolutely. 'My dear, this fixation on starting a family so soon is getting out of hand. Perhaps it's because you've been so far from home for so long, poor thing. But you must realize what children can do to one's essential social commitments. We have to maintain our proper position in the ranks, and with you away all this has fallen to me. It's such hard work, you know . . .'

Then having children will give you a rest from it, my dear, Shallvar thought impatiently.

'Of course we shall have children in time, but you know how essential making contact with the right people early on is, especially after your . . . misfortune. That's how a proper society works. I'm doing this for you, really, and when you come back you'll understand.

Remember I told you about the Tejjnakovs, well -'

Shallvar froze the picture. No, he did not want to hear any more about the Tejjnakovs. He stared at Arleene's image for a long time, wondering if it would have made any difference if he'd been home this last year; or had the charming, vibrant woman he married ever existed at all beyond his own self-deception? He looked at the image of his wedding picture, the twin of the one on his own cabin table . . .

He looked closer. Part of the bedroom was reflected on its glass. He realized the reflection had shifted slightly while Arleene had been speaking, but only now had he taken proper notice. What would it show from that angle? He reran Arleene's message with the sound down, concentrating on the picture frame. Something was moving. Surely she wasn't recording such a personal message with a maid present. Had she acquired a pet? He froze a frame and fed it into the console's computer unit for amplification and enhancement.

In a few moments the enlarged image of the photograph filled the screen, the processor fading out the motionless background and adjusting the reflection so that he could view it squarely. Bit by bit the resolution built up. It showed a man in a light robe lying on their bed, a glass in his hand.

Even through the fuzziness of expanded scan lines Shallvar recognized him.

Dac Thorron of House Mirrane.

In his numbness came unwanted recollection.

Mirrane . . . The 'misfortune' Arleene had so delicately alluded to . . . The House whose disastrous handling of the Gallomer revolt he had made the mistake of honesty and openly criticizing, unaware that an 'arrangement' had been made that its failings would be overlooked this time.

Mirrane must have made considerable recompense to win such a favour, for it had evidently pleased the Emperor sufficiently for him to be perhaps overzealous in his censure of one whose words no longer fitted the accepted version of events. From there to his virtual exile on the fringe of the system was but a few downward steps.

Now House Mirrane was in the ascendant, and his wife was . . .

Of all people how could she!

Woodenly, Shallvar reached over to his own copy of his wedding portrait. He stared at it for a timeless interval until he felt his vision clouding, then hurled it across the cabin to shatter against the far wall.

Cansonn had sought the calm of the Chapel while Shallvar's uniform was in the autocleaner. Theoretically the Chapel's doors were open at all times for those who sought spiritual uplift, but Father Modeenus had made it clear he preferred attendance only during the three daily services and his regular confessional times. But at this hour of the night Cansonn doubted any would see him, and he felt the need to draw strength from somewhere. He did not expect Omnimon to pay much attention to the likes of him, of course, but he was asking on behalf of another far more worthy. So he sat quietly in the shadows at the back of the deserted chamber, head bowed half in thought, half in

prayer.

Fount of Light, guide the thoughts of your most humble worshipper. My master is bowed down with despair and self-doubt. He should have better than an old servant to confide in, but he has no close friends among his peers on this vessel. I know he has been troubled by news from home. If it pleases you . . .

The heavy doors swung open and Father Modeenus bustled in, staff clicking across the floor. Cansonn shrank back in his seat. Perhaps if he stayed quiet he could slip out unnoticed.

To his amazement he saw Modeenus raise the top of the altar and look at something within. He had never known the altar was hollow before. What special rite or preparation was he witnessing that was not meant for his eyes? He crouched down behind the back of a pew.

The doors swung open a second time and Lieutenants Paarnas and Stroon entered. Between them was the small, surprised figure of the strange alien man Lord Shallvar had 186

saved from Modeenus's anger only a few days before. But surely he had escaped with the others .. .

'I had to take the opportunity of meeting with you again, Doctor.' Modeenus said. There was no warmth in his words.

'Well it's always nice to renew old friendships, but I've got an appointment with Lord Shallvar,' the Doctor replied lightly, 'and I don't want to keep him waiting.'

'You have no appointment,' Modeenus said. 'Lord Shallvar does not even know you are here. That was a necessary deception.' The Doctor looked bewildered.

'But I talked to him in person over the communicator.'

'An illusion. A recording I made of an earlier vidi conversation Shallvar had with the Republicans, but with new words and lip movements superimposed by my computer. At the time you spoke, Shallvar wasn't even on board the ship.'

'Oh,' said the Doctor heavily, looking up at the two guards flanking him. 'Well if we're going to be brutally honest about things, I may tell you that the way you treated Victoria was —'

'Be quiet!' Modeenus barked. 'How I treated that female is totally unimportant. You are here to answer to the words you uttered when we first met. Words that have as yet gone unpunished. Blasphemy. Denying the holy truth and order-'

'But I wasn't questioning your beliefs,' the Doctor protested. 'I was questioning the interpretation of the readings from a machine.' He pointed at the analyser. 'That is not your God!'

'By holy proclamation, the results of integral analyser examinations are accepted as a manifestation of the will of Omnimon and may not be challenged.'

'Oh dear,' the Doctor seemed to say almost to himself,

'you too.'

'What do you mean?'

'You and the Republicans are even more alike than I suspected in certain matters.'

'Lies!' Modeenus exploded. 'Omnimon has spoken to 187

me. There will be a rebirth of faith ... A new order!'

The Doctor was looking at him in alarm.

'I've heard something very similar already today. This voice ... I suppose it told you who would lead this new order?'

'The most worthy, naturally. That is why I wanted to deal with you personally before the heathens and unbelievers are all swept away.'

'You couldn't simply let me be swept away with the rest, I suppose?' the Doctor asked hopefully. 'No, I can see you've got your mind set on —'

'Be quiet, alien! Put him in the analyser.'

'I've already been in it before, thank you,' the Doctor protested as Stroon and Paarnas ushered him over to the cubical and closed the tube over him. Modeenus began adjusting the controls.

'But that was only for a brief period, Doctor, and with the beams set on low intensity. Now I shall use full power. I will discover the truth, every last detail about you — and then you will die!'

'Lord Shallvar is bound to find out what you've done!' the Doctor retorted desperately.

'It matters little now. Besides, who is to say it was not an accident?'

The projector lights pulsed brilliantly and the sound rose to a penetrating shrill. The Doctor clasped his hands over his head in pain and crumpled to the bottom of the tube.

Twenty

hallvar was about to pour himself another akrivat Swhen the fire alarm went off, reverberating throughout the ship. The urgent sound momentarily banished his personal misery as duty and reflex took over. He tore off his robe, pulled on the one-piece emergency suit that always hung ready by the door, and dashed out of his cabin towards the bridge. He met Cansonn panting up the stairs.

'My Lord ... the Chapel!' 'The fire?'

'There is no fire, my Lord. I sounded the alarm.' 'What?'

'Please come quickly. There is deceit!'

Bemused, Shallvar ran after Cansonn as the old servant headed back for the Chapel, explaining as they went.

'. . . I slipped out while they watched him suffer . . .

couldn't let such a thing be done in your name . . . hoped the alarm would distract them . . .'

Stroon was standing before the Chapel doors as they ran up.

'It's all right, Lord Captain. There is no fire here.'

'Stand aside!' Shallvar ordered. Stroon wavered for a moment, then obeyed.

The heads of Modeenus and Paarnas snapped round as he flung the heavy doors open. The light of the analyser shimmered off the goldwork and its note filled the air. The Doctor lay motionless in the bottom of the testing tube.

'Turn it off! Release him now!' Shallvar thundered. He saw Modeenus's fingers tighten around his staff and 189

wondered what he would do if he refused. But then the priest seemed to think better of it and bowed his head a fraction. The power faded and the tube lifted. Without a backward glance Modeenus strode from the room, leaving Stroon and Paarnas behind to face Shallvar.

'It was God's will, Lord Captain,' Stroon said evenly.

Paarnas looked more uncertain.

'Captain, I believed . . . the Father said . . .'

Shallvar ignored them, bending over the still figure lying on the floor of the tube. The Doctor's face was screwed up tight and his hands were clamped rigidly over his ears. For a moment Shallvar was not sure if he even breathed.

'Cansonn, fetch the surgeon —'

The Doctor's eyes suddenly flickered open. Experimentally he removed his hands from his ears and smiled in relief.

'We meet again, Lord Shallvar. You do seem to make a habit of rescuing me from Father Modeenus's tender mercies, don't you?'

Nevon knew there was nothing supernatural about the voice that came to her while she sat in her cabin. It was simply coming from that special listening device she had placed . . .

where was it? Never mind. It gave her the most detailed information, much better than anything through the official channels. In fact there was hardly any point in reading another directive while she had this. It was like eavesdropping on reality itself: the absolute truth.

Everything was just as she had suspected all along. The Doctor's claims about the analyser were just another Imperial plot. This whole world was a plot for the unwary, but she knew better now. Soon the new people's revolution would start and she would be at its head. She would be its leader. . . dare she say Coordinator?

There were worksheets to prepare before the dawn, and then one last detail to attend to.

* * *

Modeenus sat in his private cabin clasping his staff tightly.

At least the voice of Omnimon remained with him. In fact it seemed to be growing stronger. It stilled his frustrated anger, it cheered him with the thought that his humiliation was transitory. Soon, very soon, he would not need to bend to Shallvar's will again. His would be the one hand of Omnimon on this world. But he must keep it pure and free from outside interference. There was something that had to be done in advance of the arrival of the army of light. Yes, he had a special task to undertake shortly.

So he sat waiting calmly for his God to give the word.

The Doctor sat opposite Shallvar in his private rooms, sipping delicately at a fruit juice Cansonn had found. The alien's odd quizzical gaze was penetrating but not unkind.

'You know, I never did believe you the first time we met,'

said the Doctor, 'when you sounded so offhand to Modeenus about continuing with our punishment later if necessary.'

'I admit my casual manner was intended to mollify Modeenus, but do not mistake it for weakness, Doctor. I still believe it is natural for the strong to rule the weak. I have ordered punishments in the past. . . and I have killed,'

Shallvar admitted.

'Though war does sometimes bring forth these terrible necessities, I can never condone such things,' the Doctor said gravely. 'You must answer to your conscience as to whether the circumstances truly justified your actions, as we all must. But I hope you did not take pleasure in them for their own sake — unlike Modeenus.'

'I can honestly say I don't think I did, for what it's worth.

As to Modeenus, I'll certainly have to do something about him, though he's beyond the scope of military law, so I'll have to tread carefully. You realize I had no idea how he'd used your friend, or even that she'd been here. That's not how war, even this quasi-war of ours, should be fought. But I doubt the church will condemn his actions.' He frowned, feeling the weight of

his private burden once more. 'You know, I came closest to crossing that narrow margin into the unjustifiable yesterday, when I deliberately tried to recall the excitement of battle.

But it was a mistake. I think I'm finished as a soldier . . .'

And he told him about the raid on the Menoptera base.

Perhaps it was the akrivat, but he found it surprisingly easy to talk to the Doctor. Somehow the scruffy little alien reminded him of his dimly remembered grandfather. He seemed to have an infinite capacity to understand, almost like the ideal priestly confessor. How ironic and absurd to have found such a person just when his own faith was at its weakest.

Then in his turn the Doctor spoke, but there was little comfort in his words. He said the integral analyser was a sham: a useless, lying piece of machinery that had falsely divided the Rhumon race for a century and a half, and he offered to prove it with a handful of mineral pills. For good measure, after having calmly removed the linchpin of his beliefs, he mentioned grey creatures — four-armed, killer aliens lurking in caves who might be connected to the disappearance of Rep corpses and the sighting of ‘ghosts'.

Shallvar stared at him for a long time after he'd finished his incredible statement.

'You expect me to believe all this?'

'I expect you to ascertain the facts for yourself. At least approach the matter with an open mind. To do that you must make peace with the Republicans and the Menoptera.'

'You don't ask for much, do you?'

'I only want a reasonable measure of understanding and cooperation.'

'Exactly.' Shallvar brushed his crest tiredly, remembering Arleene making the same gesture. Why was it all happening at once?

'I'm not going to suddenly find I love these wingmen of yours,' he warned, 'any more than I will the Reps. But. . .

I've begun to wonder if anybody deserves what we've brought to this

planet.'

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The Doctor smiled gently.

'I think you will find the Republicans are coming round to the same point of view.'

Well, I'll even try to work with them if necessary, and I will send a recommendation home that the occupation of Mallaveria —'

'Vortis.'

'- Vortis, be terminated. For what good it will do. My word no longer carries much weight back there.'

'But at least you will have made a start. The Menoptera don't insist that you like them, nor will they demand revenge, only that you should respect them enough to leave them be.'

'We'll see.' Shallvar looked at the clock. 'It's nearly what passes for dawn here. I'm going to get a work party and look at the graves of our own dead. Maybe that's best done before full light.'

'And the analyser?'

'One thing at a time.'

As they were rising they felt a small explosion tremble through the frame of the ship. Alarms began to ring, this time in deadly earnest.

A similar explosion, more felt than heard, woke Victoria.

She looked in confusion around the tiny cabin Draga had assigned her, her dream worries about the Doctor melting away as she took in the din of alarms and the pounding of many feet. She dressed rapidly, cautiously opened the cabin door and peered out.

The ship's speakers came to life.

'Damage-control crews to the communications bay!

Damage-control crews to the communications bay!'

What had happened? Should she stay in her room or abandon ship? What if there was a fire? Which way should she go?

The speaker came on again.

'Attention wall guards — check main gate . . . wall guards respond . . . Main hatch guards to gate . . . Main hatch guards respond . . .'

Victoria looked about anxiously. It sounded as though some sort of panic was spreading. It was terrible being the only one who didn't know what to do. She would have to ask the next person who came along.

A squad of armed soldiers appeared at the end of the corridor and jog-trotted down it towards her.

'Excuse me . . .'

Her voice choked off as her eyes saucered in horror.

Each of the squad who passed her was dressed identically to the others. Each was a male Rhumon with a gaping wound on his left cheek. Each had eyes that stared ahead in a dead expressionless gaze. Each was the same man. The last one caught her by the arm as she tried to back into her room. His touch was cold and quite inhuman.

The capture of the *Royalist* was accomplished with remarkable precision and a surprising minimum of violence.

No doubt there were ulterior reasons for both of these facts, which would become clear in due course, but very simply the defenders had not been able to tell friend from foe in the confusion until it was too late. Energy screens had not stopped the intruders, and weapons proved minimally effective against them even on high-power settings, whereas the intruders carried Republican-made weapons that were set to stun Imperial Rhumon. The resistance was not aided by the discovery that the intruders were the exact likenesses, replicated and multiplied, of comrades they had known and fought beside and thought decently dead and buried. The spreading fear and confusion this fact engendered did as much to break the nerve of the defenders as mere force of arms.

Shallvar knew all this in a dazed fashion as he and the Doctor, together with the ship's senior officers, stood under the cold inhuman gaze of the creatures, who could not possibly be what they appeared. They were in the control centre, the last part of the ship to fall, but the place where the first blow had undoubtedly been struck. The air

was still misty with smoke and the acrid smell

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of scorched metal and burnt insulation. The precision equipment of the long-range transmitter in the adjacent communications room had been totally destroyed by a small but well-placed bomb. Why it had been planted Shallvar was not yet sure, but there was no doubt who had been responsible.

'This ship is now under the eye and hand of Omnimon, and will be his tool in the great work ahead.'

Modeenus stood before them, eyes blazing with a mystic fervour, staff planted majestically on the deck.

'The true believers among you need have no fear. Obey the word of the Creator and do his work and you shall be blessed with the certainty of eternal life' — he indicated the squads of replicas and the crewmen shuddered — 'such as you see these loyal sons of Omnimon have already been granted.' His tone darkened and his manic stare flicked across the Doctor and Shallvar. 'Those others - the doubters, the faint-hearted, the sowers of discord among us — shall serve under duress and perhaps gain some favour before they are judged, for there may still be time for a few to repent their ways and acknowledge the One Light before the end.'

Crewmen looked from Shallvar to Modeenus expectantly, but Shallvar could think of nothing worthwhile to say, and he would not give Modeenus the satisfaction of making demands for the return of his command which he knew would be pointless. The Doctor seemed less inhibited.

'Um, this work we have to do. May we enquire what it will be?'

Modeenus smiled almost gleefully.

'Honest toil that will make your palms bleed and your backs ache. We have to gather an offering for the greater glory of Omnimon . . .'

'From this day — Day One of New Revolutionary Year One — this ship and its complement is under my direction as Coordinator of the First Revolutionary Council of Rhumos Twelve,' Nevon announced.

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The bedraggled and still shocked crew of the *Liberation Day,* conscious of the cold eyes and steady guns of the replicated soldiers Nevon seemed to command, said nothing. Victoria stood by Relgo while on the other side of him Captain Draga sat in a chair, still recovering from the effects of a stun shot. The smoke from the fire in the communications bay following the bomb blast was still being vented from the ship, and fans whined fiercely.

'A list of new precepts will be posted in due course,'

Nevon continued. 'Until then you may assume that any activity not specifically ordered or necessary for your work is prohibited. Anybody repeating Imperial propaganda will be punished. Anybody plotting against the new order will be punished. One action for which the mandatory death penalty is already in force is any attempt to communicate with any party beyond this ship. This includes the indigenous natives known as Menoptera, and representatives of the Imperial regime. All communications from beyond this world are also banned due to their unreliable and seditious nature. Is that understood?'

Nevon clearly took the silence to signify the affirmative, for she continued, 'Obey the directions of the new revolutionary overseers. Note their examples of obedience and conformity with the ideal and the suppression of self, and you may learn much. Collect your tools from the compound store where you will be given your individual working party assignments.'

At last Relgo found his voice.

'But what are these things . . . where did they come from?'

Nevon looked genuinely puzzled, as though the question was absurd. 'Obviously they are your overseers from...

from...' For a moment she looked totally lost, then her face set again. 'Information about their origin is restricted for security purposes. You are to work as they direct.'

"Why? What work?'

'You are to work to fulfill the ultimate purpose of all evolution, of course.' Her voice rose and her pale cheeks flushed. Victoria shrank back in fear; Nevon's 196

obsession was almost palpable. 'The realization of the total collective

ideal. The perfect integration of workers and government. The superstate!'

Krestus sat under a spreading star flower tree deep within the forest crater of Scyon and listened to Chalter's report.

After the bleak mountain retreat the forest was a balm to the senses. Who could believe in war amid its colour and tranquility? How he longed for an end to worry and responsibility and to be free simply to fly up into the canopy and drink straight from the blossom, as his ancestors had done in more innocent days. But that was a dream for the future. Now his heart was too heavy for thought of flight, even though Chalter had brought some crumbs of comfort and hope.

'Yes, Leader. After the Imperials had left I was able to return briefly to our old base. I cannot claim my search was exhaustive, but I found no trace of your daughter, the human Jamie, Yostor, nor the two Optera still unaccounted for. There is a chance they escaped.'

'You have done well, Chalter. Now take your rest while you may.' Chalter departed and a nearby voice called out:

'Leader — a signal from Valio, who watches the Republican base.'

Beneath an adjacent tree, under the cover of a shroud of trailing ivy, was a glowing mass of crystal spars. Krestus bent over the communicator and spoke into it.

'Krestus receiving for Menoptera local command. What is your message?'

'Leader,' the faint voice issued from the crystals, 'I have observed unusual activity about the enemy base. They have sent out no patrols today, nor water carriers. All their efforts have been diverted to excavating in the surrounding plain, where I believe I saw friend Victoria amongst them. They also seem to be harvesting food plants, but not those they usually gather. And their own soldiers also work and not just Menoptera slaves, while others of their kind stand over them like guards. I suspect some civil 197

conflict has divided them amongst themselves. However it has come about, they must have emptied the base for this task, for I did not know there were so many Republicans on Vortis.'

Krestus stood silent for some moments after Valio had concluded his report. Then he said thoughtfully, 'Did our scouts not also report there

were no Imperial patrols seen so far this rising? Contact them. If they confirm it is still so, have them get as close to their base as possible and report what they see. Then contact high command. I must know how soon the Strikeforce will be ready.'

Something of significance had occurred. He could feel it as surely as the wind across his wings. Perhaps it could be turned to their advantage, but only if he understood its exact nature. How he wished Nalha were beside him so that he might debate the matter with her. If only he knew she was safe, of course, his own thoughts might be clearer.

The tunnel seemed to stretch for miles.

It curved slightly and occasionally dipped and rose, but fortunately its bore hardly varied. Jamie wondered how it had been dug. Even the Optera, familiar with such excavations, had seen nothing like it.

'Fine work,' Morg said in his gruff throaty voice. 'Smooth.

No tool marks.'

'Take army of Optera many hundred risings to dig such as this,' added Zenor.

The two Optera were out in front of the transporter now.

Their eyes were by far the most sensitive of any on board and they were reconnoitering ahead beyond the limit of the vehicle's dimmed lights as it rolled silently along after them.

Annolos was driving. This arrangement had come about after the two Rhumon had made a statement, which Jamie had translated for the Menoptera so there was no misunderstanding.

'Annolos and myself,' Torth had said with evident sincerity, 'have decided that we've finished with this occupation. Whatever else happens we want to make our peace with you people and leave here as soon as we can.

Also, after what we've seen, it's obvious something else is going on that our leaders, yours and ours, should know about as soon as possible. We're all in this together so we want to work with you however it seems best.'

On hearing this Nalha had extended her hands to the two Rhumon and, hesitantly, they had taken them.

So now Annolos drove while Jamie rested and translated Torth's accounts of ghosts and thefts of equipment, with Annolos interjecting to confirm that his side had experienced similar incidents.

'Our scouts have also reported such sightings,' Nallia admitted. 'Occasionally Menoptera thought missing and dead have been seen on the wing. But they were not believed and the war made it impossible to investigate further.'

'The war,' mused Jamie. 'That's played right into the hands of whoever's behind this. Before that they wouldn't have got hold of many Menoptera corpses for those pod things to copy because Yostor said you burn them. But now people are dying and going missing all the time and even if their bodies are found I expect you bury your fallen.'

Annolos and Torth nodded. 'And somewhere those grey beasts fit into it.' He looked down the long tunnel. 'And maybe we'll find out where soon enough.'

The distant sun rose higher over the plain, washing out all but the brightest stars in its vicinity, but the work did not stop. Water was taken round to the labourers together with emergency rations, but they were only allowed minutes to eat them before the work resumed under the unblinking eyes of the replica guards. The replicas, Victoria noticed, neither drank nor ate. That was not surprising. Studied closely they resembled finely moulded figurines, without any true differentiation in material composition. The only difference between their clothes and flesh was their colour and superficial texture, but they were actually all one layer.

What was underneath she shuddered to think.

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The tools that had been used to raise the compound wall around the ship were now employed to dig up scattered deposits of a crumbly greenish mineral that lay close to the surface of the plain. Mesh sieves were used to separate it from ordinary soil. Every vehicle the base possessed, including the patched and repaired ones the replicas had arrived in, was being loaded with the sifted mineral or the straggling 'weeds' that grew in equal profusion close by.

Other working parties had been set building sledges out of bound bundles of rushes, apparently to transport more of the rocks and weeds. It seemed the material was to be carried for some distance. Where, they had not been told.

The work at the Imperial base was concentrated on the plateau-like tops of the cliff walls on either side of the canyon on which the watch posts had been located. Now these were abandoned as all attention was focused on the excavation of a green mineral buried under a thin layer of loose soil. Loads were dropped over the cliff edge down into the valley, the fall winnowing the ashy soil from the heavier mineral, for gathering and bagging. Down below working parties were building sledges from the local materials under the direction of the ever vigilant replica guards.

The Doctor paused in his enforced labour to mop his face, and crumbled a piece of the mineral in his fingers again thoughtfully.

'The deposits are only shallow so it may not have been here long. I wish I knew the typical rates of erosion and deposition on Vortis.'

'How will the knowledge help us?' asked Shallvar, who was working close by. Modeenus had made no allowance for rank and Shallvar suspected he enjoyed seeing him labour like a common slave with the rest. Shallvar was more concerned over Cansonn, who was wheeling barrows to the cliff edge. He was really too old for this sort of work, though he was struggling on gamely.

'Clearly this mineral is of some importance to them to 200

be worth all this effort, but I have the feeling it does not belong here. I may have seen it somewhere else before but in another form. I wish I could talk to the Menoptera, they

—'

'No talking! Get back to your work!'

It was Stroon. Modeenus had made him his special assistant, to keep him informed of the progress of the work on the upper levels, which he found too tiring to inspect personally. Paarnas had clearly not been judged sufficiently loyal, for he laboured with the rest of them.

'Not getting your hands dirty I see, Lieutenant.'

'I am doing God's work!' the man retorted. 'Father Modeenus has

commanded it. Open your heart to the truth, Lord Captain, and you will understand.'

But Shallvar caught the man's eye as he spoke and recognized the fear under the bluster. He had no more idea of what this madness was about than the rest of them. As he walked away he passed near a replicated guard, and Shallvar saw him shudder.

The transporter slowed as Morg and Zenor hurried back to it.

'Change ahead,' Morg reported. 'Enters different workings. Recognize Optera tunnels.'

'And can hear sounds,' Zenor added. 'People moving . . .

but smell wrong.'

They all followed them forward. There was no point in leaving anybody to guard the transporter since any threat would come from ahead.

After a couple of hundred yards, Jamie saw what the Optera had meant. The walls of the tunnel became rougher and cavities seemed to have been filled with dressed stonework. Loose rock and gravel became thicker under his boots and he saw it was rutted with many tracks and heavy tyre marks. Then came the glimmer of artificial light. The tunnel opened out into a much loftier cavern, its roof supported by massive freestanding columns of rock, some of which were natural, others clearly constructed. From 201

behind these came the sounds. Edging forward cautiously on his hands and knees, Jamie peered round a limb of rock.

Before him lay a combination of subterranean store room and barracks. The remains of dismantled machinery, parts of vehicles, discarded wrappings and cartons were scattered about. Cleared areas and shelves in the rock suggested places where people, or at least people-shaped things, might have lain down. Even as he looked on, the last of its inhabitants were leaving. He shuddered as he saw three grey beasts climbing on board a battered transporter driven by another Rhumon soldier. Or perhaps something that merely looked like a Rhumon but had climbed out of a pod just like those he had seen in the crater.

The others crept up to join him, but nobody spoke until the transporter started up and drove swiftly away into the mouth of a

second tunnel on the opposite side of the cavern.

Gradually the noise of their tracks and grating, unbalanced motors died away. Jamie could sense the place was deserted now and let out a sigh of relief.

'I'm glad they're out of the way. But where is this?'

Morg and Zenor were looking intently around them at the cavern.

'These old deep Optera workings, made before we came back to light,' Zenor said. 'Maybe under a dwelling place.

Above tunnels of new Optera and nests of Menoptera. We can reach surface from here. See in corner.'

Annolos swung a torch in the direction indicated and Jamie could just see a twisting ramp and flights of steps leading up from the floor of the cavern into the darkness.

Without a word they headed towards them, Nalha in the lead. Of them all, he realized that the Menoptera must like such places the least.

'If there is a way out I can fly to my father,' Nallia said determinedly. 'He must know what we have discovered.'

'Is your wing better now?' Jamie asked.

'The injury was minor — it is mended enough. But even if it were not I wish to see the sky again!' Her light steps took her springing rapidly up the ramp.

'Watch out there are no more beasties up there!'Jamie called after her as she disappeared round the curve of the shaft.

'I have my gun,' her voice floated back. 'Don't worry.'

They pounded on after her.

'Hold it!' Torth said suddenly, bringing them to a halt and flicking his torch beam over the arch spanning the ramp ahead of them. It illuminated a flat platelike object clinging to the rock like a limpet. 'That's... a demolition charge!'

'There's another!' Annolos yelled, picking out a second device further

up the shaft.

'Nalha!' Jamie yelled at the top of his voice. 'Be careful -'

There was a flash and roar from above. With a crash and rumble of boulders a cloud of dust and pebbles rained out of the darkness, sending them scrambling back down the ramp and onto the floor of the cavern again.

'Nalha!'Jamie called out again desperately. There was no answer. He had a terrible vision of her delicate body crushed under the debris. He was about to start upward once more but Torth grabbed his arm. Even as he pulled free there came a second explosion lower down the shaft and they retreated further back into the cavern, choking in the fresh billows of dust. When it cleared they saw that the bottom of the ramp shaft was choked shut by tons of debris.

'We can't do anything for her now,' Torth told him firmly.

'I regret that is true,' Yostor agreed. 'We must hope she reached the upper levels safely.'

With a heavy heart Jamie nodded. Nalha was beyond their aid.

'I'd better get the transport,' Annolos said flatly, and ran back towards the tunnel.

With an effort Jamie forced himself to think clearly. 'How long before the rest go off?'

'Obviously they gave themselves just enough time to get clear,' Torth said. 'If they set them at the top and 203

worked downwards these are due to blow any moment, let alone any others we haven't found yet. They didn't want anybody using this place once they'd done with it, that's for sure.'

'Perhaps they knew we were corning and hoped to trap us here,' Yostor suggested.

'Maybe that was just a bonus.'

The transporter rolled into the cavern. Its driver's door swung open and Annolos called out, 'Come on! The other tunnel's the only way now.'

A third blast rocked the walls. A cloud of dust billowed out of the

ramp shaft and fragments bounded across the ground towards them. Sharp heavy cracks warned that the ceiling had been weakened. There was no alternative, Jamie realized bitterly. They scrambled back into the transporter and Annolos headed for the tunnel through which the enemy vehicle had disappeared. They were not ten yards down it before there was a final concussion and the disc of light behind them was snuffed out.

Annolos slowed their speed and they looked at one another unhappily. They were left with no other choice but to go forward again into the unknown.

Twenty-One

wel contracted into as tight a ball as possible to blend Tin with the background, and so was able to watch discreetly as Bris and Ilex approached the entrance to their laboratory. So that was where they had concealed it! A fragment of cold inert matter within a small cloud. Yes, that would hide its characteristic emanations from all but the keenest senses. The cloud also neatly contained the project's power transducer array.

Twel waited patiently while they checked that the energy conduit systems were functioning properly, then strained to hear the unlocking sequence for the entrance. Yes, it was faint but distinct. Bris should have employed better shielding, but then neither of them had any reason to suspect there was anyone else within hearing range.

The portal dilated, revealing the mouth of the displacement interface beyond. With a final cautious scan of their vicinity, Bris and Ilex disappeared through the interface and the entrance closed smoothly behind them.

With some relief Twel expanded back to more normal proportions. Now all it required was some patience and a little speculation. How soon after they entered their laboratory would it be before they realized that a rather subtle alteration had been made to the project environment?

They obviously had not noticed last time, but it should surely have become evident by now. Once it did they would immediately suspect Twel, and no doubt they would instigate another angry search. It was all very predictable -

and incidentally permitted someone conveniently close by, someone who possessed the new entrance access code for instance, a second opportunity to

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visit Bris and Ilex's laboratory undisturbed. There were bound to be further details of their experimental methods worth noting.

Twel was all in favour of the acquisition of knowledge, as long as others did the hard work.

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Twenty-Two

day and a night of almost continuous work had A brought them close to total exhaustion. Victoria no longer cared what happened after their usefulness was ended, she only wanted to sleep. As the Rhumon system rose once more over the plain her wish was, surprisingly, granted.

Gestures from their guards — they never spoke as far as she knew — directed them to return to the compound. They stumbled leaden-footed across the plain to find every vehicle, including the battered selection the replicas had brought with them, lined up neatly before the perimeter wall as though for inspection. Each had a wood-and-rush sledge trailing behind it and both sledge and vehicle were loaded to capacity with ore and weed. The labourers were formed into ranks before the transports.

Nevon marched out of the compound gates briskly and surveyed them with an air of impatient satisfaction.

'You have met your production quotas. Well done. Now board your vehicles. Phase two of the plan will commence.'

Swaying slightly with fatigue, Victoria wondered if anybody would ask what 'phase two' was about or where they were going, but even Captain Draga remained silent.

Perhaps they were simply too tired, or all realized by now that there were some depths of obsession it was pointless to plumb.

Speakers had been fitted to the lead car. As Nevon climbed into the

cab a stirring military march bellowed forth across the plain. Numbly the prisoners found precarious perches on the bundles of weed stacked on the sledges. If 207

Relgo hadn't helped her Victoria would probably not have made it. She fell into a hollow in the bundles as the sledge jerked away. No feather bed could have been more comfortable, and she had fallen into an exhausted sleep before the now deserted base was out of sight.

Modeenus had affixed the trigon of Omnimon to the front of his personal transport, which led the convoy. Perhaps not by chance, this was Shallvar's commandeered robot hunting drith, which, Shallvar thought wearily, was adding insult to injury. They rumbled away from the base, the sledges trailing behind in ungainly fashion, but generally sliding easily over the ash and sand. The replicated guards rode on the tops of the transports, looking forward and back, covering every possible angle of escape, while the workers sprawled on the bundles of weed on the sledges. The guards'

alertness was probably unnecessary, Shallvar thought. Most of his men were too tired to contemplate escape anyway. He was particularly worried about Cansonn, and helped make the old man as comfortable as possible, which, despite his exhaustion, clearly offended his servant's sense of propriety.

'Please, my Lord, I don't want to be any trouble. You should have the best resting place.'

'Nonsense, Cansonn. Lie still and get some sleep. That's an order.'

'As you will, my Lord. . .' The old Rhumon's eyes flickered closed even as he spoke.

He turned away from Cansonn to find the Doctor peering about with undiminished interest. The strange alien must have unusual reserves of stamina.

'I wonder where we're going now,' he said.

'Does it matter?' Shallvar replied shortly. 'I still want to know why. Why this . . . madness!'

'Oh it's not madness. It has been too carefully planned for that. Somebody, or something, has been taking advantage of the situation here and turning it to suit their own ends. If we knew the ultimate purpose it would all make perfect sense.'

'I fear we will only know the truth when it's too late.'

'Now don't give up hope,' the Doctor said firmly. 'Jamie and the free Menoptera are still out there, remember, and they are bound to realize something is going on.'

'What's left of them after my interference. Anyway, what can they do?'

'You'd be surprised at the tenacity and ingenuity of the Menoptera. The last time I was here they'd been forced off Vortis for yean by the Animus, but were still fighting to regain their world. They'd built a spacefleet and planned a huge invasion -'

'They built spacecraft? I didn't know they were capable.

I've never seen any'

'Probably because they didn't need them anymore. They are not an acquisitive people and are content with what they have here. Besides, the moons of Vortis are bleak places.

They were only drawn out of deep space by...'

The Doctor blinked, staring into the sky, then looked around him at the convoy and its burdens with dawning comprehension.

'Oh dear me. I'm beginning to understand now.'

'What?'

'What this is all about. Are you sure you have no idea where we're going?'

Shallvar looked about at the trail and tried to judge their direction.

'This way leads through the buffer zone to the edge of the highlands.'

'What's beyond them?'

'A sea - the Sea of Lodos, I think the natives call it.'

'What's it like?'

'Nothing much. It's very shallow. Just a few isolated mounts and craters.'

'Isolated. Yes, I think that might be the key'

Victoria awoke aching in every limb but with a slightly clearer head. The bumping swaying motion told her that they were still travelling, but from the position of the sun 209

she guessed she must have slept for some hours. She realized Relgo was holding a water bottle to her lips and she drank gratefully.

'Thank you. Where are we?'

'See for yourself - but be careful you don't fall off.'

She pushed herself upright and looked around. Relgo's warning had been justified.

They were descending a winding cleft in a great escarpment that seemed to her about a thousand feet high, and which stretched away in a sinuous but unbroken line in either direction. They had left the rugged highlands and forested valleys and now before her was a dramatic change of scenery. From a narrow beach at the base of the cliffs a sea, tinted in emerald and topaz but darkening to purple, stretched away to the horizon. It shimmered slightly, but was otherwise so calm that it reflected almost perfect images of two of Vortis's moons as they hung above it like lost balloons. From their present elevation she could see that the shallow waters were dotted with islands, some rearing jagged peaks, others perfectly circular craters whose walls held back the waters and protected their little enclaves of vegetation within.

'But where are we going? We can't be going to drive out into the sea!'

'Apparently we are,' said Draga, who was crouched nearby. 'Unless Nevon's madder than we think. There's nowhere else.'

'We'll sink!'

'No. All the vehicles are amphibious and the sledges should make serviceable rafts, until they get waterlogged.

The sea's always calm. We can go some way'

'But. . . some way to where?'

The tunnel had sloped gradually downward for a while, then leveled out. But Jamie had noticed the walls had taken on a surface shimmer,

almost as though they had been sheathed in glass. The rocks behind this layer were darker and glistened wetly.

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The air had grown staler as they proceeded. According to Annolos if it hadn't been for the transporter's built-in filtration and recycling plant they would not have survived.

Even the Optera could stay outside the cab for only a few minutes at a time.

They drove onward cautiously.

The Doctor had sat in an intense brooding silence for hours, stubbornly refusing to reveal his thoughts. Even the change of scenery as they reached the edge of the highlands had been greeted with a distracted grunt and a nod as if it merely confirmed his inner suspicions. It was only as they descended the escarpment and saw the tiny flotilla of Republican craft just leaving the beach that he began to take an interest.

'Ah. It got them too I see. I hope Victoria's all right.'

'You mean . . . the Reps have been taken over like we were? Aren't you surprised?' Shallvar asked.

'Well it does rather make sense. A certain symmetry.'

'But who was responsible? Not Draga?'

'I doubt it.'

'But who?'

Modeenus's voice could be heard from the hunting box on the back of the mechanical drith. He seemed angry and was apparently shouting into a communicator. His evident confusion gave Shallvar a flicker of bemused satisfaction.

'Well obviously Modeenus wasn't expecting to see them.

Who's he talking to?'

'I suspect his opposite number, so to speak.' 'Nevon-two?'

'Yes,' the Doctor muttered. 'But how was ***she*** influenced?

Modeenus was obvious, in retrospect. And not the same motivation surely . . .'

'Doctor, I don't know what you mean.'

'It's all just speculation.'

'Never mind. I want to hear it. We must be prepared.'

The Doctor sighed. 'Very well then.'

He spoke as they made their way down the narrow 211

path to the beach, then turned into the glassy waters and surged out into the tranquil sea. The robot drith paddled naturally, while paddle blades extended from transporter wheel hubs and churned out foamy wakes as they headed after the Rep convoy.

Victoria watched the seascape roll by and tried not to think of whatever fate held next for her.

The sandy bottom was clearly visible, never more than thirty feet below, and dotted with clumps of trailing purple weed. A ghostly creature like a glass crab scuttled away through them, almost all that was visible of it being its complex pulsating internal organs. A little way off on the surface a cluster of giant shells drifted, resembling a flotilla of sailboats with spiny membranes erected to catch the slight breeze, while the soft-bodied creatures within them browsed across the bottom with long pale tendrils.

Then came shouts from the rear vehicles in the convoy.

People were pointing. Another column of vehicles like their own was ploughing through the still waters and slowly drawing level on a parallel course.

'Royals,' Draga said, chuckling mirthlessly, 'and no better off than we are. So it looks like we'll all be together to the end - whatever it is.'

Victoria saw a small dark figure riding one of the wallowing rafts opposite waving to her. Despite everything she felt a sudden wave of relief lift her.

'It's the Doctor!' she shouted, and waved back excitedly.

'Nevon doesn't sound too happy about seeing them,'

observed Relgo.

Incongruously, Nevon had scrambled up onto the roof of her transport and was screaming at the replica soldiers to open fire on the enemy. But for the first time they seemed to take no notice of her, remaining impassive and keeping their attention rigidly focused on the prisoners and cargo.

4Shallvar listened to Modeenus hurling insults and condemnations back across the water to his arch enemy. The 212

naked hatred in his words shocked him, despite the circumstances. Where did a churchman learn such language?

Modeenus spoke to a nervous Stroon who was riding with him and pointed at Nevon. Stroon picked up a rifle and aimed at the gesticulating Republican officer over the water.

The nearest replica guard turned round and shot him with a medium stun blast and unemotionally returned to his watch, even before Stroon crumpled to the bottom of the hunting box. An incredulous Modeenus raised his staff at his replica driver, only to have it knocked from his hands. A second blow sent the priest reeling backwards and out of sight. The two convoys ploughed onward, Nevon's futile cries occasionally breaking over the splash of the paddle blades.

'Mutiny?' Shallvar wondered aloud.

'No,' said the Doctor almost sadly. 'They were never Modeenus's or Nevon's to command in the first place. Both have been pawns of the real enemy. But now their usefulness is coming to an end . . . along with the rest of us, I'm afraid.'

'Surface light,' Morg reported. 'And growing things.'

The tunnel had angled upward at last and the air had freshened. A point of light had appeared in the blackness and the Optera had shuffled ahead to investigate. Annolos now drove them slowly forward until they reached the first questing strands of ivy that fringed the tunnel mouth. They disembarked and stealthily padded the last few yards towards the starlight of Vortis.

The tunnel emerged in a sloping stretch of rocky ground, rather like the inside of a vast shallow bowl. Clumps of bushes and spindly flower trees dotted the slope, growing steadily thicker below them.

'We are in a forest crater,' said Yostor. 'See, the tracks of those we follow lead towards the centre.'

'Aye, and many more besides,' said Jamie, examining the rutted ground about the mouth of the tunnel. 'Why all the coming and going through here? What's so important about this place?'

'And, if it's been so important to them, why blow up the other end of the tunnel?' Annolos wondered. 'What's happened to make them do that?'

'Or what's ***going*** to happen?' Jamie said. He hefted the pistol he had picked up from the transporter's gun locker.

'Maybe we'd better find out before it does.'

The twin convoy's destination had been visible for some time. Other islands and mounts had fallen away as they left the great highland wall behind them until there was only the tinted sea under the purple and black sky. Slowly the smudge of a lone crater had risen over Vortis's brief horizon and expanded until they saw every detail of its low walls fringed with vegetation. The water shallowed rapidly and suddenly tracks and tyres were biting ground once more.

One by one the transports surged ashore opposite a cleft in the crater wall. The column drove up through it, heaving the half-waterlogged rafts behind them with their cargoes of weed and confused passengers.

The interior of the crater was thickly wooded with typical Vortis flora, but a path seemed to have been cleared leading directly to the centre. They had been expected, Victoria thought, as the strange collection of vehicles trundled along the gently sloping track. Then the trees thinned and opened into a broad glade with a large dark pool at its centre. From a tiny island in the middle of the pool rose a tangled growth of trailing ribbon leaves, all clustered about an egg-shaped mass some eight or ten feet tall.

But she had no time to take in further details. Waiting about the pool as they drew up at its edge were half a dozen of the grey creatures the Doctor had described to her. She shut her eyes in fear and disgust. Had she been lost in the tunnels with those things? There were gasps from the prisoners and then shouts as the replica guards forced them down from the sledges. Victoria slithered to the ground with the rest and cowered away. But the grey creatures paid them no attention,

simply opening the transport's cabins and emerging with heavy containers marked with brightly 214

coloured lettering clasped in their double-armed embrace.

They then stalked off away through the trees.

'Explosives,' said Draga dully. 'What do they want with more of them? We're beaten.'

'I wouldn't say that quite yet,' said the Doctor, as he pushed through the milling throng of prisoners and took Victoria's hand reassuringly. 'Quite a novel journey, wasn't it?' he added inconsequentially, a twinkle in his eye still defying whatever fate had in store for them. There was strength and hope in his touch, she discovered. At his side was an Imperial officer who was helping an old Rhumon man to rest against the hull of a transport.

'This is not quite how I intended we should meet next,' the officer said dryly, addressing Draga. 'I regret to say I have not brought that jar of preserves I promised.'

'Under the circumstances I forgive you, Lord Captain Shallvar,' Draga replied. 'This is my first officer, Relgo-four.'

Shallvar nodded politely, but before they could speak further the replica soldiers stirred the prisoners and set them unloading the weed and sacks and crates of ore. More gestures directed them to begin tipping them into the dark pool, where they bubbled and dissolved as they touched the surface.

'Be careful not to splash yourselves,' the Doctor warned loudly. 'It's acid.'

His eyes, Victoria noticed, were narrowed on the odd plant growth in the centre of the pool as though studying it intently. But then came a distraction. Even as the unloading continued they heard two voices raised in strident and fanatical opposition, apparently oblivious of their situation.

'Blasphemer!'

'Poisoner of minds!'

'Godless harridan!'

'Counter-revolutionary corruptor!'

Nevon and Modeenus had found each other in the confusion and had to be restrained from flying at each other's throat. Straggling free they ran to the very edge of 215

the pool, each with arms outstretched towards its centre.

'Manifestation of Omnimon, smite down the arch unbeliever!' Modeenus demanded.

'Coordinator supreme, show your power! Bring order out of disorder. Destroy this irrational creature!' Nevon countered.

Victoria saw Draga and Lord Shallvar exchange ashamed looks, as much as to say, Have we come to this?

Then the tangle of slender leaves on the tiny island in the centre of the pool stirred, as though disturbed by the wind -

but there was no wind. With a dry rustle the egg-shaped core rocked slightly, then slowly rose on spindly tentacles like some grotesque amalgam of spider and octopus.

Victoria gave a gasp and began to back away from the pool side, as did the rest of the prisoners, dropping their burdens.

Only the ring of replica guards prevented them from taking to their heels.

'This is what you expected?' Victoria heard Shallvar ask the Doctor.

'I'm afraid it is.'

The egg pulsed with a ghostly internal light. 'Omnimon, you have come to us!' Modeenus cried rapturously.

'Fool!' Nevon screamed back. 'This is the natural universal ideal. A perfect collective entity —'

A sonorous voice boomed out, reverberating about the glade.

'You are nothing, either of you.'

It was cool, faintly mocking, even sardonic. Eerily neither male nor female and strangely insidious. The words were not actually loud, but they gave the impression that they could become so if desired. Nevon

and Modeenus trailed off into shocked silence.

'I used you to serve my own purpose. I stimulated your irrational and irrelevant beliefs and through you directed the actions of your kind,' the voice continued.

Nevon and Modeenus were staring at the pulsing light, slowly shaking their heads as the meaning of the remorselessly contemptuous words began to sink in. For the first 216

time, Victoria felt, doubt had entered their narrow mental worlds.

'Now the second phase of my plan has begun and your usefulness has ended . . . except to feed my knowledge.'

A tentacle snaked across the pool and coiled around Nevon, lifting her off her feet with wiry unnatural strength.

She tore at it even as it cut into her uniform and drew blood.

The Doctor started forward to grab her but it was too late.

Struggling, Nevon was lifted back over the pool so that she dangled over the pulsing core and its bed of tendrils.

'Liar!' she screamed wretchedly. 'Deceiver . . . monop-olist! Egotist! I'm a true daughter of the Revolution, you'll never corrupt me . . .' The tentacle uncoiled and she fell into the bed of lesser tendrils which writhed up to meet her like a pit of snakes. For a mercifully brief moment only her form was still visible, then it became grey and ragged and was gone.

The tentacle reached out a second time and hovered over Modeenus. But the priest was shaking his head mechanically and beating his clenched fists on the ground.

'Omnimon!' he screamed. 'Why have you abandoned me?'

He fell down and began rolling from side to side, tearing at the sandy ground, making incoherent noises that might have come from a spoilt child deprived of a treat. In horrified silence they watched the pitiful spectacle, wondering if death wouldn't be a merciful release now. The tentacle hesitated then withdrew.

'He is unfit for direct mental absorption. Only suitable for gross organic matter supply. He may live until then.'

The egg pulsed faster and bobbed slightly on its spindly legs.

'Knowledge is being correlated,' it said, as though half talking to itself. Suddenly it trembled, then steadied. 'I know of you, Doctor,' it said slowly. The Doctor squared his shoulders defiantly 'And I know you, Old One. Or should I say, Animus?'

217

Twenty-Three

he party of grey beasts were working their way Tmethodically around the inside of the crater. Deep holes had been pre-drilled in radial lines up the inner slopes as far as the rim walls themselves. Into each hole they dropped a silver cylinder from their carton of explosives, then tramped steadily onward.

Jamie and the rest watched them pass from cover and made no sound until they were out of sight. 'What are they up to, do you think?' he asked. 'High-yield demolition charges,' said Torth. 'There won't be much left of the walls of this place once they go off.'

'First the cavern, now here. It doesn't make sense,' said Annolos.

'Can we do nothing to prevent them detonating?' asked Yostor.

'Not unless we've got the master control unit,' Torth explained.

'Listen!' said Morg suddenly.

There was a distant buzzing murmur filtering up through the trees. Jamie waved them on and they cautiously headed towards it.

'Animus. . . yes, that was the name the natives gave my progenitor,' the spider thing agreed. The handful of captive Menoptera among the prisoners shrank back at the sound of the name.

'So you are the Animus's seed, so to speak?'

'A precaution it made before you helped destroy it, Doctor. But I have all its knowledge even up to the 218

end . . . Continue unloading the isocryte into the pool!' it warned suddenly. The replica soldiers jerked their rifles menacingly. Slowly the dumping resumed, the prisoners listening incredulously to the continuing exchange.

'Isocryte! I thought that was what it was,' the Doctor said with satisfaction.

'You know of it?'

'In a different form. It shouldn't really be here, which was why it took me so long to recognize it. Neither should you, for that matter. This is no longer your universe.'

'Irrelevant. We survive, shaping worlds as we please.

That is all.'

'Your predecessor tried that last time with Vortis.'

'Crudely. By choosing inefficient servants in the Zarbi, by spreading its web gradually and converting the organic material as it went, it allowed the natives time to take action against it. I have avoided those mistakes.'

'Yes, the Menoptera would never have allowed a second web to grow. But you still needed tools. The grey four-armed creatures - you made them first, didn't you?'

'They were my prototype servants: living web beings. But they had their limitations.'

'Of course. You could hardly let them out in the daylight.

Somebody was bound to notice. The war must have been a great help to you, what with the confusion, the restriction of the Menoptera's surveillance . . . and the bodies. Patterns for your new servants, I think.'

Yes. I had tunnelled here over many rotations, where I could grow freely once more. But still I needed materials to complete my plan and less obtrusive servants who could obtain them for me. I created a plant that could replicate the pattern of a dead body in detail sufficient for it to pass a casual inspection.'

'But you also needed innocent dupes to act for you,' the Doctor said, glancing angrily at Modeenus, who was curled up in a ball on the ground whimpering softly Everybody worked round him. 'Nevon and Modeenus helped conceal your own existence as long as possible, and then destroyed 219

all means of interplanetary communication so the Rhumon could not call for help. But how? Was it gold? Your predecessor could control people's minds through contact with it, I recall. Modeenus was surrounded by gold of course, but Nevon certainly wasn't.'

The Animus gave a terrible braying sigh, which Victoria realized with a shudder was its equivalent of a laugh.

'As you said, I had learnt subtlety, Doctor. I avoided direct control, but merely reinforced both their fanatical desires and obsessions. In Nevon it required encouraging what she considered a mild perversion: the handling of precious ornaments. She kept a store of such confiscated items. Eventually she secretly wore small gold badges all the time taped to her skin. A pitifully fallible and weak creature.'

'You made her more so by your meddling!' 'What of it?

What do I care for the life of inferiors?' ' "Inferiors". Is that all we are to you?' 'You can be nothing else.'

'Did you consider the alternatives?' the Doctor said passionately. 'Have you ever attempted cooperation with another species? Do you even know what it is like to have a friend?'

'Friend? A worthless concept.'

'We all need friends. It can be terribly lonely without them.'

'I have strength. I have power!'

'Poor substitutes. In any case, you're not all-powerful yet, are you?'

'But I soon will be, Doctor.'

The last of the ore and weed was being dumped. The Animus extended its tendrils and they slithered into the pool. The slave workers began to back away uncertainly.

The Animus's body pulsed more brightly. Victoria squinted into the glare. She felt the radiance wash over her and fill the glade. She tried to turn her head aside, but the allure of the light was overwhelming. It wanted her to step forward -

into the acid pool.

'Doctor!' she wailed.

'Fight it, Victoria! It's another intelligence just like in Tibet. The yeti, the Detsen Monastery, remember? Fight it, all of you!' he shouted to the other prisoners. 'It's trying to take over your minds, but there are too many of us. It can't control us and its creatures as well. Look.'

The replica guards had lost their unwavering concentration and were drooping like plants wilting in the heat.

'You can't control all of us without gold,' the Doctor taunted the Animus. 'Mind control takes a lot of energy.'

A couple of prisoners were fighting against the waves of mental force towards the nearest replicas. They managed to snatch up their rifles and fired them at full power at the things that had stolen the forms of their fellows. The replicas were cut in half by the close-range blasts and fell twitching to the ground. Inside each was grey web, spilling out grotesquely like old stuffing from a rag doll. The creatures kicked and thrashed about, still tilled with inhuman life and vigour, hands clawing at their attackers.

'Now the Animus core!' the Doctor shouted.

The pulsing light diminished. Before the two soldiers could fire again they were cut down by gunfire from reanimated replicas. The Animus vented its terrible laugh once more.

'You cannot win, Doctor. You thought you could divert me with your words, but it is useless. While we talked the preparations were completed. You cannot escape. I shall absorb you and grow, but not by gradual increments. I have prepared long for this moment. In a day I shall cover half of Vortis. I shall absorb all life and knowledge. When I have mastered the use of isocryte I shall spread to the other worlds in this system!'

There came the rip of multiple explosions from beyond the glade, the concussions pounding the ground under their feet and sending clouds of dust and rock high into the air.

'The sea shall flood this crater and I shall absorb it and all organic life here. I shall grow and you cannot stop me -'

A small hail of energy bolts stabbed from the trees and 221

burned into the Animus's body. With a terrible moaning wail it flung

up its many tendrils to shield its core from the fire. The replicas staggered, temporarily confused by their master's pain. The prisoners leapt upon them, beating them down with their bare hands and grabbing at fallen weapons.

The Doctor took Victoria's arm and jerked her into the shelter of the armoured hull of a transporter. The glade filled with struggling men and criss-crossed bolts of blue-white energy. A familiar kilted figure broke from cover and bounded recklessly through the melee towards them.

'It's Jamie!' Victoria shouted.

They heard a growing roar from beyond the glade. It was as though a river had burst its banks. A torrent poured through the trees, smashing down lesser shrubs and covering the ground with a sheet of mud and water that foamed about their ankles. Another wild stream appeared from a different direction.

'It was the grey beasts' doing . . .' Jamie said, reaching their side in time to shoot a replica who was splashing towards them. 'They set charges in the hillside.' The replica collapsed, scorched web bursting from its body to ooze into the rising water. Dead eyes remained un-dimmed. Its fingers clawed at the mud to try to reach them and Jamie had to fire twice more before it lay still.

'Jamie - the Animus!' the Doctor commanded. 'We must kill it while it's still vulnerable.' Jamie spun round obediently, then his jaw dropped.

Victoria screamed.

The Animus core was twenty feet high and swelling visibly, pulsing more brightly every second. Its tentacles lashed the sky, while a lacework of grey web was already coating the nearest trees and reaching out through the waters towards them.

Amid the mayhem Draga lost track of Relgo. She and Shallvar were both sheltering beside the same transporter.

They each lacked weapons and wristband comm links and were reduced to shouting orders at their own soldiers 222

and ducking as energy bolts zipped dangerously close. It was almost like being on the same side.

'We've got to get them back to the transports,' she shouted to him. 'Then maybe we can break out of here.'

Shallvar looked at the struggling knots of men and creatures scattered across the fast flooding glade and then at the Animus growing ever larger at an impossible rate.

Fingers of grey web were already spreading from the pool.

'Then we'd better do it now. All those things have to do is hold us a little longer and we're finished.'

'Then let's set an example,' she said, edging along the side of the vehicle, reaching up for the driver's door and jerking it open.

'Wait - let me . . .'

She froze him with a withering look.

'Ride passenger or get your own,' she snapped.

For a moment he looked nonplussed. Then he grinned.

'If I had a weapon I'd play co-pilot gunner.'

'My Lord!'

The old man she had seen Shallvar set down against the side of a transport earlier was struggling through the water towards them, holding out a rifle before him with both hands. A look of surprise and delight crossed Shallvar's face as he stepped forward quickly.

'Cansonn! Always there when I -'

An energy bolt from the encircling replica lines struck the old man square in the back, burning a hole through his chest. Sheer momentum, or perhaps determination, carried him two steps further. Then he sank to his knees, arms still outstretched, a puzzled look on his face. Shallvar leapt forward and caught him as he toppled face down into the water.

For a moment the two huddled figures were frozen in an embrace of death and Draga thought Shallvar would surely be cut down by another shot. But his luck held. Slowly his head lifted revealing a look of anguish such as she had rarely seen. Then it was wiped away as the cold mask of the professional soldier descended. He laid the 223

thin body gently down, grabbed the rifle and surged back through the knee-deep waters to the transport.

'Drive!' he commanded as he scrambled into the cabin, all his rage turned to one purpose. 'Smash as many of those things as you can. I want to see them all flattened before we leave!'

Draga did not argue but gunned the engines and swung the heavy machine around in a shower of mud and spray.

Shallvar flung open a slit window and fired ahead. Energy bolts began to burn them in return. Rhumon crouching in the waters behind floating debris, sniping with recaptured weapons, leapt aside. They plunged through the ragged skirmish lines and drove directly at the replicas and grey creatures. Spongy web-filled bodies rebounded from the transport's prow and were ground into the mud under its wheels. Draga swung them round and they cut a second swathe through the enemy ranks.

She saw men fighting their way back to other transports, Republican and Imperial piling indiscriminately in together, and vehicles surging forward in showers of spray. One passed close by them and with infinite relief she saw Relgo's defiant features hunched over the controls. She should have known he'd do the right thing.

Then she slewed to a halt. Before them was a transport already smothered in ragged grey web and more bubbling up around it. Beside it was a writhing shape that had been a man. Something like a giant serpent slithered through the water. Her eyes flicked back along its length and she swallowed hard. On its rapidly flooding islet the main body of the Animus was growing at an unbelievable rate, its tentacles arching over into the waters. She imagined them sucking more mass and nutrient up every second. No more fire was directed at it. Perhaps it had already grown too large for hand weapons anyway.

The rear hatch was suddenly flung open. Shallvar twisted round, rifle at the ready. The Doctor, Victoria and another alien piled in, hauling a dazed and soaking Modeenus with them.

'We couldn't just leave him,' said Victoria defensively.

'There is nothing more we can do here,' the Doctor added bitterly, 'but there are some of Jamie's companions up in the woods. We must simply rescue everybody we can before it's too late. It will take larger

weapons than we have available to stop the Animus now.'

Draga looked at Shallvar, who nodded quickly.

She drove them up the slope of the crater towards the trees, scattering another few replicas while battling the inrushing sea, following the line of energy bolts stabbing out from the undergrowth. The young male alien they called Jamie hung out of the side hatch calling loudly. In moments a Menoptera, two Optera and two Rhumon, one Republican the other Imperial, had hauled themselves into the rear cabin.

'That's all!' the Doctor shouted.

But the hatch had hardly closed when a fresh torrent burst through the trees and broke about them, briefly washing over the windscreen and leaving silt and plant fronds in its wake. The transport slithered backward despite the racing motors towards the centre of the crater once more.

'It's no use,' Draga said through gritted teeth, trying to keep control. 'The water's not deep enough to float us but we've lost our traction.'

'At this rate we'll be afloat anytime,' Shallvar replied.

A grey creature reared out of the water and clawed at the windscreen frames, its chisel fingers screeching across metal and glass. Something heavy began to thump at the vehicle's sides. Dimly, through the mud-streaked panes they could see other transports surging around as helplessly as they were, while still bodies bobbed in the water, which was becoming shot through with more fronds of grey and lashing tentacles by the moment.

'I don't think we've got that long,' Draga said slowly, a coldness settling on her heart.

'Then we will die fighting,' Shallvar replied simply.

A bouquet of fire exploded outside with an audible expansive crump of ignition, sending flames flickering over the scarred glass. When she had blinked the afterimage from 225

her eyes Draga saw the grey creature that had been clinging to the exterior thrashing about in the water, its arm and head still smouldering. Another burst of flame enveloped a replica who was trying to blast a hole in the cabin window of a nearby vehicle. Then

fireballs were blossoming across the flooding crater, driving the Animus's creatures back from the transports. Pools of burning oil splashed across the water. Jamie looked up through the tiny roof port and yelled in triumph.

'It's the Menoptera — a whole army of them!'

Draga and Shallvar peered out of the narrow cabin windows. Winged forms were dropping out of the sky, swooping down over the crater floor and hurling flasks that burst into showers of flame as they struck. Above them hovered a fleet of angular black spacecraft of peculiar design. The snouts of energy cannon, looking suspiciously familiar, protruded from pods in their sides, while flexible ladders snaked downwards from belly hatches to trail across the turbid waters.

'I warned you not to underestimate the Menoptera,' the Doctor said to Shallvar. 'Perhaps we should accept their invitation of a lift out of here, before the Animus recovers from its shock.'

They unlatched the hatches and threw them open, helping to push and tug Modeenus up with them, while Menoptera soared and dived and twisted about their heads. Draga had always found their flight unnatural and unsettling, yet ironically it looked now as though it was going to save her life. Had she secretly envied their freedom? she wondered as she clung to the metal roof plates. Or did it seem too primitive an ability to be associated with otherwise intelligent beings? For now, as she watched them methodically destroying the grey web creatures under a sky heavy with their own battlecraft, there could be no doubt of their capability. No, she would never underestimate them again.

The Doctor snagged a trailing ladder and helped Victoria start up it. They must have been spotted from the craft above, because more ladders dropped down beside the first 226

and in moments they were all climbing. Strings of Rhumon and those Menoptera prisoners still wing-pinioned were being lifted in similar fashion from treetops and other marooned transports. As she climbed higher the whole crater seemed to shrink in under her feet and she saw clear to the walls, now breached in twenty places by foaming plumes of seawater.

'Are you unharmed?' A voice called. A female Menoptera was hovering by them. 'Nallia!' Jamie exclaimed in delight.

'You made it out of the tunnels - but how did you get here?"

'My father's scouts observed the exodus from the Rhumon camps. They guided our Strikeforce, which has only just become operational.' 'Aye, in the nick of time!'

'Nallia, your craft must destroy the Animus's core before it grows any larger!' the Doctor shouted.

'They shall, Doctor, as soon as all the prisoners are clear.'

Even as she spoke, the craft's energy cannon crackled loudly and Draga felt the static wash of its discharge. It was a signal for a barrage to begin. The area immediately around the flooded acid pool had been evacuated, and now the Animus, isolated in its fringe of grey web, could be attacked by heavy weapons. She heard its tremulous cry of pain boom out as the bolts struck home. Huge tentacles reared up from the waters to wrap about the vulnerable pulsating core, but she knew they would not protect it for long. She halted her ascent, wanting to see the disgusting creature burn.

'Don't dilly-dally!' the Doctor called out confusingly from another ladder. 'We're not safe yet!'

More batteries of cannon cracked out. Bolt after bolt burned the creature. Smoking tendrils began to fall writhing and twisting away. The Menoptera craft manoeuvred over the roof of another transport where more soldiers were waiting, but it did not let up its relentless fire.

'It's finished!' Shallvar exclaimed in fierce delight.

But even as he spoke a blaster bolt deflected from its 227

course in mid-air without touching the Animus. So did the next one.

'Up quickly!' the Doctor yelled, tangling his foot in the ladder in his anxiety, 'It's learning faster than I thought.'

Jamie reached up from below and freed him. He climbed frantically up the last few steps and disappeared. Draga also reached the hatch and felt strange, hard but pliant Menoptera hands pull her in and guide her aside to make room for those further down the ladder. She was momentarily disorientated, standing on the deck of a strange craft while all about her the natives she had thought of as primitives went about their tasks with efficiency and purpose. Shallvar and the others were looking out of ports set in the side of the craft and she stumbled across to them.

It had not been an illusion. The heaviest beams were glancing off some invisible barrier that surrounded the Animus.

'Surely it can't have a forcefield?' Shallvar said.

'It has the isocryte,' replied the Doctor, 'and its knowledge and biochemistry are far beyond anything you have ever encountered.'

'Oh no - look at that!' Jamie yelled.

A Menoptera warrior was tumbling through the air towards the Animus as though caught in some violent gale, despite his beating wings apparently driving in the opposite direction. He fell into the writhing mass below the core, the tentacles enveloped him and he was gone. Below them a lone transport had managed to find enough traction to make it almost to the lip of the crater. Then, inexplicably, it began to slide backward with ever-increasing speed, twisting sideways and then rolling over and over back into the growing lake that now surrounded the Animus. Could that have been Relgo's vehicle? Where was he?

'We're too late,' the Doctor said ominously.

The ladders hanging below the craft began to sway towards the crater centre, forcing the last of the evacuees on them to stop climbing and cling on for their lives. The winch drums started to turn, reeling the ladders in, but 228

the motors immediately began to whine. In moments the ladders were hanging tautly halfway to the horizontal. There was a smell of burning and the motors suddenly cut out.

Nallia almost fell in through the hatch, braking with a snap of wings.

'What is happening?' she gasped.

They felt the whole craft lurch, and a hum of power became noticeable. Crazily, it seemed as though everything was tilting even though the horizon remained unchanged. A loose tool rattled across the deck and a Menoptera crewman tumbled over and flattened against a bulkhead. The frame of the ship creaked in protest.

'A gravity beam!' grunted the Doctor, grabbing hold of a stanchion to steady himself. 'The Animus is learning how to project its power. Nallia, the fleet must retreat, but fly low until we're out of range. You cannot fight this weapon.'

'I will relay the message. But what of those still on the ladders?'

'All they can do is hold on until we're clear.'

The deck seemed almost vertical now, but Draga and Shallvar hauled themselves back to the belly hatch, shouting encouragement to the people below even as the ship's drive droned louder against the counterforce drawing it back to the crater. A wind began to buffet the ship as the air itself was torn past them, keening through the hatch, snatching the words from their lips and sending the ladders dancing and whipping back and forth wildly like kite tails.

Then Draga realized the last man on one ladder was Relgo.

Hold on, hold on, she mouthed into the gale, knowing he could not possibly see her. The Menoptera ship fought to make headway, edging over the rim of the crater and out over waters scoured by the artificial gale that surrounded it.

There was a flash and a streamer of smoke from the craft beside them as its drive burnt out. Instantly it tumbled backward as though on the end of some

monstrous invisible elastic cord. Draga watched its destruction through the open hatch, and for one terrible thrilling moment she hoped the Animus was going to be smashed to pulp by the sheer mass of its new prize. But at the last instant it must have been deflected, for it veered to one side and ploughed into the floor of the crater with a huge splash, splintering into a thousand pieces.

The force on them increased and the tangle of ladders streaming behind the ship cracked like whips, flailing against the hull. One by one, three men were shaken loose by the impacts.

The last of them to fall was Relgo.

She could only watch in helpless anguish as he spun through the air towards the pulsing mass of the Animus.

Then he was gone.

Numbed by the shock, she felt Shallvar's hand draw her back from the edge of the hatch. She was hardly aware of the changing note of the ship's drive and the gradual increase in forward motion. Slowly the

gale died away. As the sea sped by more swiftly below them many hands hauled the ladders in, and the dazed and pummelled survivors were helped on board. The great highland escarpment loomed before them and suddenly they were twisting low through canyons and river valleys.

Behind them a grey web began to spread across the shallow sea.

Twenty-Four

he missile strike sounded like a rumble of distant Tthunder even this far inland. It barely registered on Draga's consciousness any longer. Both the ***Liberation Day***

and the ***Royalist*** had been firing regular salvos into the Sea of Lodos for hours now. There had been no measurable effect on the Animus's growth reported so far, but they hoped at least they were slowing it down.

Another Menoptera shuttle flight set down in the Canyon of Spires and began to unload a fresh cargo from the Rhumon bases. Soon there would be nobody left there but the missile crews. When the Animus invaded the highlands, as it might anytime, the ships and their fixed launchers would have to be abandoned. The encampment here was taking shape rapidly with temporary shelters already spreading among the spire bases, but she would still be a Captain without a vessel. And without a first officer . . .

She forced herself to concentrate on the task in hand.

Above her the brilliant stars of the Vortis night blazed out and four moons hung heavy in the sky. Grounded within the canyon were the remaining Menoptera Strike-force craft in the process of being resupplied by flights from the free Menoptera lands. In their shadows was a gathering such as Draga had never expected to witness.

Shallvar, cleaned and dressed in a fresh uniform once more, rose before the assembly. The Doctor stood by ready to translate his words if necessary.

'We all understand the need for urgent action in the present circumstances, but I hope you will allow me to read out a brief joint statement on behalf of Captain-231

Commander Draga-three and myself.

'It is officially confirmed that as from this day forth all impositions, restrictions and demands placed by Rhumon military forces, whether Imperial or Republican, upon the inhabitants of the planet Vortis shall

cease. It is further stated that all hostilities between Imperial and Republican forces have ceased for an indefinite period, and will in any case not be resumed on the surface or within the planetary space of Vortis or its satellites. In light of the current emergency we also pledge jointly all the resources at our disposal, both in personnel and materials, towards the destruction of the entity known as the Animus for as long as they shall be required.

'A copy of this statement will be relayed to our respective governments when interplanetary communication links are restored, with a recommendation that the sovereignty of Vortis be recognized by them, and proper restitution be made for the losses incurred through the actions of their forces.

'We add our own personal and sincere regrets for the suffering we have caused the peoples of Vortis by what we now see as an unwarranted and unjustified intrusion into their affairs.'

The assembly was silent for a moment digesting his words, and Draga saw Krestus and Captain Jalto, the Strikeforce commander, conferring together. Then the two Menoptera stepped up to Shallvar and herself and extended their hands. Krestus spoke.

'We accept your words in sincerity and good faith. Let us put the past behind us and go forward together.'

A strange mixture of Rhumon and Menoptera applause rang out, reverberating from the towering needle-like spires that loomed above them.

'A council of war is convened,' Krestus continued.

'Representatives of all sides shall attend, for the Animus makes no distinction among us, therefore neither shall we.

Let those with other duties go about them for now, knowing they may be called to arms when a course of action has been decided.'

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The ordinary personnel dispersed. Under the sparkling skies and the fights of the ships the council debated.

'First,' said Krestus, 'I call on the Doctor, old and wise friend of the Menoptera, to explain the nature of our enemy in its new guise.'

The Doctor stood and looked about him gravely.

'The Animus is one of an incredibly ancient race sometimes called the "Old Ones". They are beings of great mental power, who regard all other life forms as inferior to themselves and suitable only to serve them or to be incorporated into their own substance as they grow and spread their influence. Unfortunately, this particular creature has also provided itself with unusual physical abilities by incorporating isocryte into its tissues.'

'Just what is this isocryte, Doctor?' Draga demanded. 'I feel I've dug enough of it to have a right to know.'

'Isocryte is created only under extreme conditions of atomic stress, such as the collision of two stars, and is consequently very rare. I was quite surprised to find it here at all, which was why I didn't recognize it at first. It's more usually associated with the galactic cores or the centres of star clusters, not their outskirts where Vortis must have spent much of its life. Chemically it's not unusual, but it has a unique subatomic structure. When stimulated electrically and mechanically, so that its energy fields interact, it generates counter-gravitic waves.' He smiled at Jamie briefly. 'I puzzled my young friend recently by pointing out that the Menoptera should be too heavy to fly. The solution has now become germane to our present problem. I believe isocryte, in its less distinctive friable form, is taken up by certain plants the Menoptera eat and so is absorbed into their tissues, especially their wing veins. Their own natural bodily electric field, combined with the motion of their wings, creates a gravity eddy, allowing them to fly.'

'Such theories have been proposed to explain our ability, Doctor,' Krestus agreed, 'but flight has seemed so natural to us over the ages that it is only recently we have troubled to examine its mechanisms closely.'

'I suspected as much. But you do use the more familiar crystalline form of isocryte to drive your spacecraft, don't you? That is an indication of the power which the Animus has already learnt to focus, as we have already tragically witnessed. A combination of positive and negative gravitic force also creates an immaterial shield around it. But that is only the merest hint of its potential. When its predecessor covered half the planet, it absorbed isocryte gathered by its slaves in organic and mineral form through its network of acid pools and

streams. It then was able to draw smaller bodies into Vortis's orbit, presumably searching for more organic matter. At the time of my previous visit, not suspecting isocryte was present, I theorized that it had employed purely magnetic forces to achieve these results.

Well I was wrong.' He pointed up at the multicoloured moons. 'There is the proof of its ultimate power. When it has mastered the use of isocryte the Animus will be able to propel itself throughout the system as easily as Menoptera fly across the surface of Vortis.'

There was a dispirited silence, which Draga felt compelled to fill.

'Unless we can stop it,' she said positively. 'Exactly. But how?'

'Well, how did you kill it last time?' Shallvar asked.

Krestus answered.

'Our ancestors had built a device known as the web destructor, which generated radiations deadly to the core of the Animus. But it took many years to construct, and in any case the Animus may be too large to be destroyed in such a manner now, even if we could reach its core.'

'And time is something we haven't got,' Shallvar pointed out. 'How long did it say it would be before it covered half the planet? A day? Even if it was a boast we can't have much more than that.'

'I am prepared to attack with all the force at my command,' said Jalto, 'if it will destroy that abomination.'

'And if our ships were functional we would join you,'

Draga assured him.

'Might not more of your people come here in similar vessels?'

'They're bound to eventually if contact is broken for long enough. But I estimate the nearest of our fleet is ten days away at best.'

'About the same for us, I suspect,' Shallvar confirmed.

'In any case such a direct attack would be suicidal,' the Doctor said. 'There must be an alternative.'

'We're already using the highest-yield warheads we have on our missiles,' Shallvar pointed out. 'But it must be deflecting them as it did the energy bolts.'

'And a near miss is useless. Judging by the way it was growing only a direct hit on the core is going to stop it,'

Draga added.

'Then it is not a question of destructive power but of precision, and getting within the Animus's defensive shield,'

the Doctor said thoughtfully 'Tell me, how large are the warheads themselves?'

'Not large. A man, two at the most, could carry them easily'

'Then I believe I know how they may be placed close enough to the Animus to do the job. if you can have a couple of them brought here, and if Captain Jalto would arrange to collect my TARDIS from the forest where we landed —'

'Now Doctor,' Jamie said uncomfortably, 'you know you can't steer the TARDIS that well.'

'Yes, Jamie,' the Doctor said impatiently, 'the TARDIS is occasionally somewhat erratic. But in this instance the Animus's use of isocryte must be creating a significant distortion of hyperspace. In fact it may have been some disturbance of the isocryte layer here that caused our original rough landing. If I disconnect the time-travel circuits I can use that to provide precision spatial guidance.'

Draga was feeling lost.

'What are you talking about? Just how does this spacecraft of yours work?'

'It is becoming clear to me,' Krestus said. 'The Doctor's vessel is said to pass beyond normal space and time. The Animus would not sense you coming until it was too late.'

'Hopefully that would be the case,' the Doctor confirmed.

'We would then simply drop a primed warhead out of the door and dematerialize again before it went off.'

'Well I'll believe it when I see it,' said Shallvar. 'You will very shortly, unless anybody can suggest a better plan?'

Nobody could, and the council adjourned.

Annolos and Torth stood uncertainly before their respective superiors in the newly erected joint command tent.

'From what we have heard from the Doctor's companions and Krestus's daughter, since your escape from the resistance base you have both shown a certain ability to cooperate with each other and with the native . . . with the Menoptera,' Lord Shallvar said.

'Lord Captain, I'd like to explain —' Annolos began unhappily.

'No,' Shallvar said firmly. 'Some things are best left unexplained. Such as the exact manner in which we detected the Menoptera base, for instance. That entire operation was . . . unsatisfactory, for various reasons. Perhaps it should all be put behind us.'

Both men's faces suddenly set and they nodded silently.

'But a new era of cooperation has begun,' Draga said. 'In view of that fact, recent losses of senior personnel on both sides, and also for your part in the attack on the Animus in the crater, you are to be given field commissions.'

Annolos and Torth stiffened slightly with surprise.

'You will be special liaison officers between the Imperial and Republican forces and the Menoptera people, reporting to your respective lieutenants as indicated in the newly posted command rosters. Your duties will be to ensure the maximum cooperation between all three sides with the minimum of friction... well, there is no precedent for this but I'm sure you understand what is required.'

'Yes, Lord Captain.'

'Thank you, Captain-Commander.'

'That will be all for the present. Dismissed.'

Annolos and Torth saluted and departed, still dazed.

Draga looked questioningly at Shallvar.

'Surprising as it may seem, I think we're redundant for the moment. Everything we can do has been done, until the warheads and the Doctor's machine arrive. If we make it look as though we're on a tour of inspection, perhaps we can take a short walk.'

Shallvar nodded slowly. They set off slowly among the towering spires that fringed the valley sides. For some time they were silent, then both started to speak at once.

'I apologize,' said Shallvar quickly. 'Please continue.'

'I was just going to ask. . . about that old man who died bringing you the rifle . . . was he really your personal servant?'

'Yes, of course. For three generations Cansonn has served House Hokossion . . .' Shallvar faltered slightly, his face a blur in the pools of shadow under the spires. 'That preserve I promised you, well he made it. . .' There was a distinct clearing of his throat. 'But why ask?'

'When he died you seemed so . . . upset.'

'Of course. Do you think I have no feelings?'

'But everybody knows Imperial servants are hardly more than slaves.'

'There is much,' Shallvar replied stiffly, 'that you do not know about us. Loyalty is highly regarded wherever it may be found. Besides, Cansonn was . . .'

'Yes?'

'My friend, in a way. Probably one of the best friends I ever had.'

Draga looked confused.

'But what about other officers . . . your wife?'

Shallvar laughed bitterly.

'One's wife is not necessarily a friend. Mine certainly isn't. In fact I will no longer have a wife shortly. Just before this madness began I sent a communication home 237

to my House's legal representative instructing him to begin separation proceedings.'

'Oh. I'm sorry.'

'Thank you.'

There was another long silence, then Shallvar said, 'When your officer Relgo fell from the ladder, I could not help noticing . . . you seemed unusually moved by his loss.'

'He was a good first officer. Loyal. Efficient . . .'

'Yes?'

Draga dropped her shoulders slightly.

'I think, after this mission, I might have offered him a marriage contract.'

'You might have offered . . .? Oh. I thought such alliances were discouraged in your system.'

'There are ways . . . for those determined enough.'

They circuited the base of a spire and started back to the camp centre.

'Perhaps,' Draga said slowly, 'our people are more alike than we suspected. As the Doctor kept saying.'

'Bad reflections,' Shallvar murmured.

'What?'

'We've each become bad reflections of what we once were - distorted by those damnable analyser machines. I wonder if we can ever recover what we've lost? Can we extend this cooperation further, do you think?'

'You know how our respective home worlds will react to that sort of talk.'

'True . . . but there are ways, for those determined enough.'

Draga smiled, then said suddenly, 'You're going with the Doctor?' It was only half a question. 'Yes.'

'It's totally against correct procedure, of course. Senior officers cannot risk themselves for irrational personal reasons.'

'I know. But at some point I think duty to oneself, to what you know is right, takes precedence. If I'd followed my conscience instead of doing

what I told myself was dutiful a few days ago . . . Never mind. My military 238

career is done with anyway. Besides, if this fails I doubt there'll be anything I could do to stop the Animus even if I stayed at my post here or in my ship. So maybe I'm taking the easiest option in risking all or nothing.' 'We'll see. I'm going too.'

Modeenus also insisted on joining the Doctor's party.

He had recovered from his collapse in the crater with remarkable speed. There was still an unnatural sharpness in his gaze but no other sign of instability, though Victoria thought he looked a little lost without his staff. He had actually mumbled apologies to her, the Doctor and Draga.

'I was deceived by an evil force,' he said simply. 'It perverted my beliefs and actions. It made me worship a dark shadow of the truth. Allow me to offer my life to put an end to it. Should it be so ordained I will carry the device into the heart of the monster. That would satisfy Omnimon by way of atonement. Please do not deny me that chance.'

'Well, we hope it won't come to that,' the Doctor said, looking at Shallvar, who shrugged and nodded. 'Very well, then. You may come.'

'Thank you, Doctor,' Modeenus said gravely.

'Doctor, why can't I come?' Victoria demanded once again.

'You know it's not safe.'

'But... if you fail, then there's nothing to stop the Animus covering Vortis anyway.'

'Some places are bound to escape. The Animus will most likely leave before it has absorbed everything. You'll have a chance.'

'But -'

'No. Please don't argue, Victoria. You won't have to wait long. If all goes according to plan we'll be back in five minutes.'

The TARDIS arrived hanging from a sling under a Menoptera warship, and was carefully set down before many pairs of curious eyes.

Once inside, leaving the others in the control room to marvel at the unexpected interior dimensions of the ship, Victoria and Jamie were able to change into fresh clothes at last. Victoria briefly considered hiding away somewhere but she knew the Doctor would not leave in those circumstances. As she emerged, the Doctor was carrying out of the TARDIS a small silver box which he placed carefully on the ground.

'A homing beacon to guide us back to this spot when we've finished,' he explained.

The ships from the Rhumon bases returned and the weapons were unloaded. Apart from the ominous but surprisingly compact missile warheads, of which there were four — each side having provided one reserve — there were sidearms and a heavy-duty energy gun mounted on a tripod.

'Common sense precautions,' Shallvar pointed out, and Draga agreed. The Doctor regarded them unhappily.

'Well you can leave two of the warheads here. One reserve will be quite sufficient. It's a painful enough necessity to carry those, but all this . . .'

'Come along now, Doctor,' Jamie said, 'there's no point in doing this by half measures, you know that.' He, Victoria noticed, was now carrying an extra heavy knife on his belt.

'I know,' said the Doctor glumly, 'but I don't have to like it.'

The devices were loaded aboard the TARDIS and its temporary crew made ready. Victoria heard Krestus talking to Nallia.

'I must represent the Menoptera people in this task. 1

leave you, my daughter and lieutenant, to take whatever action is necessary should we fail.'

'Yes, Father,' Nallia said levelly, but with obvious restraint.

Victoria felt a moment of giddiness, almost as though the ground had shifted under her. 'An earthquake?'

'Possibly the Animus's doing,' the Doctor said. 'It may

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be getting so massive it's disturbing the planet's crust, perhaps burrowing for more isocryte.'

'Our scouts are monitoring its growth from the edge of the highlands,' Nallia said. 'It has spread far across the sea, but is not extending itself this way yet.'

'We will resist it if it does,' Captain Jalto promised.

'Well hopefully your scouts will have something else to report soon enough,' the Doctor said grimly. 'Signal the missile batteries to hold their fire. We're leaving at once.'

One by one they entered the TARDIS. The Doctor waved and the door closed.

Victoria stood with the others as the pulse of dematerialization grew. Then the TARDIS faded into thin air.

'How did it do that?' wondered Torth aloud. 'Probably...'

began Annolos, in a lecture-room manner. 'Yes?'

'Actually I haven't the faintest idea.'

Victoria stared at the homing beacon resting on the ground. She was determined not to move until they returned.

The minutes dragged by and the knot in her stomach grew tighter. Surely they should have made the attack by now.

Nallia called the scouts observing the Animus over her hand communicator, but they reported no change. Victoria saw her antennae droop slightly and knew what she was feeling.

Where were they? What could have gone wrong? She read the same dawning of despair in the faces around her, though Yostor remained stoic and Annolos and Torth tried to hide their concern.

A message form was brought to Captain Jalto from his warship. He read it with obvious astonishment.

'It is from our observatories in the free lands. The shift we felt earlier must have been but a glimmering of some far greater force. According to the stars, Vortis's trajectory through the outskirts of the Rhumon

system is beginning to change!'

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Twenty-Five

wel saw Bris and Ilex leave the project entrance in Tapparent states of shared agitation and annoyance.

'Positive Twel responsible. Change not random chance/

system malfunction. Time elapsed since last known intrusion correlates with probable time of alteration initiation,'

Bris said in basic.

'Agreed,' replied Ilex. 'Suggest locate Twel immediately while project equilibrium re-established. Confirm/ eliminate existence of further unauthorized modifications. Pre-empt additional problems.'

'Agreed. Begin search immediately. Maximum sensitivity.' They departed at speed back towards the tutorial zone. Twel waited for them to get well clear, then cautiously approached the concealed project entrance.

Everything was working out perfectly and with any luck they would be gone for at least a tenth of a cycle. Carefully Twel repeated the precise unlocking code sequence Bris had been so careless to radiate earlier. The portal dilated smoothly revealing a standard displacement interface beyond. Eagerly Twel slipped through it and was gone.

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Twenty-Six

he TARDIS pitched like a ship on the high seas.

TEverybody clung on to whatever they could for support. One of the conical warheads that had been sitting on its base toppled over and began to roll about dangerously until Shallvar managed to wedge it in a corner. The tripod-mounted energy cannon slithered away from its

place covering the doorway. Jamie managed to grab one leg as it passed to prevent it crashing into the console. 'What's happening, Doctor?' he yelled. The Doctor scanned the flashing lights of the control panel and peered anxiously at the uneven motion of the time rotor.

'Interference. I was trying to track the Animus's isocryte trace but there seems to be a much more powerful source. I can't get a proper fix . . . hold on!'

The lowering base rumble of materialization reverberated through the machine. There was a heavy thud, then silence.

'Well, we're here,' the Doctor said brightly.

'But where?' asked Draga. 'Near the Animus?'

'I don't think so . . .' the Doctor muttered, switching on the scanner.

The screen showed only darkness at first until the Doctor panned the camera. Then a vertical line of softly glowing green light appeared, but there was no clue as to its size or nature. Shadowy angular forms could dimly be made out, but equally without any sense of scale. As the others peered at the image curiously the Doctor continued to check the displays.

'No sign of life. External temperature, pressure and 243

radiation are tolerable, but gravity is only a few percent of Vortis's normal. Most peculiar.'

'This is all very fascinating, Doctor,' said Lord Shallvar,

'but we have a mission to undertake and very little time to spare. Can you please lift us off from wherever this is and try to locate the Animus again.'

'I'm afraid I can't,' said the Doctor apologetically. 'The level of hyperspace distortion is swamping all other sources.

I'm not even certain if I can find the homing beacon now.'

'Do you mean, Doctor,' said Krestus slowly, 'that we are trapped here?'

'Oh goodness me, no,' the Doctor replied emphatically.

'All we have to do is discover the source of the interference and switch

it off'

'I might have known it wouldn't be as simple as we thought,' said Jamie. 'Right then, let's be going.' He reached for the door control but the Doctor said quickly, 'Wait a moment, Jamie. We're going to need to take some equipment first. Torches, rope and hikers' staffs are called for, I think.'

'You make it sound like a mountain-climbing expedition we're going on, Doctor.'

The Doctor glanced at the screen again.

'That may not be far from the truth.'

The air was thin and cold outside the TARDIS. Indistinct blocky shapes loomed in the darkness, but there seemed to be a solid surface under them. Jamie took a step forward, felt as though he were falling, stumbled and bounced into the air.

'What! Hey, get me down!'

'Low gravity, Jamie,' the Doctor called out. 'You've gone beyond the TARDIS's own field. Use less muscular effort and move slowly and you'll be fine. Remember how it was on the moon? Well you're even lighter here.'

'Oh, like that, is it? I remember.'

Jamie was already dropping to the floor again. He allowed his knees to bend to absorb the impact gradually, then stood erect feeling curiously light-headed. The rest 244

followed him out cautiously, walking with gliding steps, shining their torch beams out into the darkness.

The TARDIS was resting in the angle between two high, slanting walls that ran down and away into the darkness on either side, like spreading roots at the base of a tree. They craned their necks. The walls were simply the lower braces for a truly immense column that disappeared up into the darkness above their heads beyond their torches' range.

Jamie guessed from its curvature that it was at least a quarter of a mile across. The depth of the part-lit gloom about them receded as he attempted to probe it, and the sensation of being surrounded by some

vast structure grew.

The air was dead to any noise they made — their voices spread out and were gone without an echo - yet it was not silent. There were slow bass rumbles and hums that took several seconds to rise and fade, and a gradual creaking like the contraction of heated metal from a forge, but drawn out a hundredfold. The line of green light they had seen on the scanner hung in the darkness to one side of them, also beyond the range of the torch beams and clearly on a similar scale to the column at their backs. As they moved away from the vast column that towered over them, a second similar bar of light became visible, rising vertically until it was blurred by haze. Close by it was a glowing red ball contained in a framework whose outline was starkly silhouetted, like a sun bloated and softened by sunset captured in a huge cage. From its top, red filaments spread like veins up and away out of sight. Opposite this was a dark blue cubical shape of equally indeterminate dimensions which glittered and sparkled mysteriously. As their eyes adjusted they gradually discerned, interspersed with the glowing green bars and other strange objects, a forest of the gigantic columns rising up all around: dwarfing them as the mightiest oak forest would dwarf an ant. The analogy was heightened by the fact that the columns threw out branches as they rose, which in turn divided until the distant roof was hidden by a veritable latticework of struts and beams whose sheer size was hard to grasp.

'This is . . . incredible,' Shallvar said softly, humbled by the immensity around him. 'The mass involved . ..'

'Piezoelectric bracing, I suspect,' the Doctor murmured.

'Doctor,' Jamie asked, 'is it my eyes, or do those columns lean away from us the further away they get? Are they toppling?'

'Your eyes aren't deceiving you, Jamie, but everything is quite stable, I think. It's just that perpendicular and parallel are not necessarily the same thing. Take a look at the floor.'

Jamie frowned and squinted along the shadowy surface under their feet.

'It's some vast machine,' Draga said, half to herself. 'But who built it. . . and why?'

'A cathedral of mechanism,' Modeenus muttered. 'What terrible

splendour.'

'Truly an edifice worthy of the gods,' said Krestus,

'though they would have httle need for such material devices.'

'More to the point,' said the Doctor, 'is why anyone should need isocryte on such a scale. That's the source of the interference that diverted us. Don't you recognize it in its activated form?'

The light from the green bars glittered from Krestus's many-faceted eyes.

'Isocryte! Why... on such a scale it could move a world!'

'I think that may be precisely what it's doing,' said the Doctor. 'You all realize where we are, I suppose? We have simply travelled a few thousand miles vertically. This void encircles the core of Vortis itself, which we are currently standing on and which also, as you can see, is quite artificial. Your world, Krestus, is a more wonderful place than you ever dreamed possible.' And he left them in an awestruck silence and hopped away into the darkness, playing his torch over the distinctly curved dark plane between the massive columns that literally bore the weight of a world.

Jamie recovered first and managed to grin at the others.

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Almost everything since joining the Doctor had been miraculous and incomprehensible and quite beyond his understanding. Fortunately, early on in his travels, he had evolved a simple solution: stay with the Doctor and let him worry about the hows and whys. He applied this principle now and bounded away after him. A moment later the rest followed, perhaps also fearful of losing the only one among them who seemed to understand the immensity that confronted them without being overawed by it. As the light from the TARDIS's lantern dwindled to a spark Jamie heard them begin to exchange hesitant speculations.

They caught up with the Doctor to find him standing on the edge of an open well in the floor between the spreading column braces in keeping with the scale of the rest of the place. It was some three hundred feet across and perhaps two miles deep. Its inner wall was fringed with many recesses, protrusions and ledges bearing complicated pieces of machinery, illuminated in many places with coloured lights and glowing, oddly shaped symbols. The bottom of the

shaft faded into a blur of hazy white light.

'Not a difficult climb in this fractional gravity, and it will diminish even further as we descend. Especially if Krestus will be good enough to scout the way for us.'

'What do you expect to find down there?' Draga asked.

'At the very least some kind of control centre. It is the logical place for one. But hopefully also answers.' 'But the Animus,' Krestus reminded him. The Doctor's eyes sparkled. 'Perhaps even the answer to that as well.'

The TARDIS had been gone for nearly two hours. The others came and went on their own business, but only Victoria had nothing else to do but wait. Nallia, who had even more reason for personal anguish than she, tried to comfort her.

'Do not give up hope. Why, when I barely escaped 247

from the tunnels as the charges demolished them at my heels, I thought friend Jamie and his companions were lost as they did me. But we all survived. And do you know, when I emerged onto the surface I found myself in the very settlement in which Chalter saved you from falling.

Remember your good fortune to be rescued when all must have seemed lost to a wingless one.'

'That's right,' said Annolos, as he and Torth walked up to them. 'Things do have a way of working out for the best. I mean, who'd have thought we'd all be here now after the way we first met?'

'You are all very kind,' Victoria said. 'But waiting is very hard sometimes . . . what with that creature out there.'

'The scouts still report it is making no move in this direction,' Nallia said reassuringly.

'Maybe it tried to grow too fast and has got indigestion,'

Torth suggested lightly.

'We've got some pretty powerful weapons and good positions,' Annolos added. 'Perhaps it knows that taking the highlands won't be as easy as a crater and some sea.'

Victoria wanted to believe him, but in her heart she knew the Animus could overwhelm them at any time it chose. But then why was it waiting?

It was not so much a descent, Jamie decided, once he had become accustomed to the dizzying vista, but more falling by stages.

They dropped from one ledge of incomprehensible devices to the next with dream-like slowness, sometimes falling fifty feet at a time. Some of the levels contained tunnels and galleries that stretched away into the darkness under the skin of the world core, while others were almost sheer and featureless, save for complex patterns grooved into their surface like perpendicular plough furrows. They passed close to one of the glowing symbols they had seen from above. The apparently random form spanned a whole level, and appeared to be made of a milky glass about a foot thick. What it represented he could not make out.

'What function does this great pit serve?' Modeenus asked.

'It looks like a combined access, storage and service shaft,' said the Doctor. 'It probably continues beyond the upper machine space and runs right through Vortis's crust all the way to the surface.'

'But the size of it. What requires such dimensions to pass through?'

'Maybe we'll find out.'

Krestus, who had been gliding down the shaft ahead of them, suddenly called out urgently. They saw him land on a ledge a couple of levels below and dropped down swiftly to join him.

A secondary gallery like a square cut cave opened off the shaft. It was much higher and deeper than any they had seen before and shone with light. Cautiously they entered. Down each side ran a row of what Jamie took to be glass blocks, mostly man-sized or larger, and of crystalline clarity. They glowed softly, as though lit from within, though there was no discernible light source. Every one contained perfectly preserved specimens of some form of Vortis life. On one side were plants, ranging from tiny ground flowers to full-grown forest trees, while along the other was ranged the animal kingdom. They walked deeper, passing blocks containing several examples of tiny shelled creatures, then specimens of flying insects they had encountered the first day in the forest, a huge millipede, several

larvae, a Zarbi . .

. Jamie glanced ahead and faltered, but Krestus pressed on.

The next block held a couple of Optera.

The one beyond that half a dozen adult Menoptera.

Krestus sank his head in dismay and incomprehension.

Nobody spoke for a long time until he murmured, 'Who has done this? Why?'

'I don't know,' the Doctor said, 'but I promise you we'll find out.'

Victoria was nodding her way into an exhausted sleep when the alarm sounded. Immediately the air filled with 249

the swish of wings as resting Menoptera flew from peaceful corners around the valley and swarmed about their ships.

The thud of military boots rang out as a complement of Rhumon dashed from the temporary shelters clustered about the bases of the rock spires and headed towards the camp perimeter. Even as she anxiously took in this sudden activity, Yostor swooped down to land beside her.

'Is it the Animus?' she asked anxiously.

'I do not know, friend Victoria. But Nallia said I should see to your safety if such a time came, and so here I am.'

'Oh . . . thank you. Perhaps we can find out what's going on.'

As they started across to the joint command hut there came the rising hum of engines. One by one, five Menoptera ships lifted off and swung away low and fast over the canyon walls and out of sight.

Inside the hut the Rhumon commanders, together with Annolos, Torth and Nallia, were standing about a large map of the highlands. One look at their faces was enough to confirm Victoria's fears.

'Part of the Animus has somehow reached the highlands without being detected,' Nallia was saying as they entered.

'It has been reported here.' She circled an area rutted with valleys. 'Web is already spreading rapidly. Strikeforce craft will attempt to

destroy it before it grows too massive. But if they fail . . .'

She did not need to go on.

There was no bottom to the shaft.

They stood on the rim of the lowest level and stared down through an opening as large as that at the top into a haze of light. Squinting through slotted fingers Jamie made out a spherical void perhaps ten miles across. At its centre, seeming curiously out of focus, was a smaller globe that sparkled with unearthly fight. From this radiated a dozen glowing conduits that buried themselves in the inner surface of the surrounding shell. For a

moment Jamie felt he was seeing a curiously ordered but inverted landscape: a patchwork of differently shaped but symmetrical fields seemed to glitter with many-coloured lights, divided by rows of glowing dome-like objects like neatly ranked hayricks seen on a distant hill. Paths between them led to clusters of angular forms that almost resembled scattered villages. Yet bizarrely it was all strangely familiar.

Then a sense of proportion returned and he realized where he'd seen its like before.

'It's just all one huge control console, isn't it, Doctor?

Those are screens and indicator-light things and buttons, like the panels on the TARDIS console, only spread over the inside of a hollow ball.'

The Doctor nodded slowly.

'Yes, Jamie, I think that is exactly what it is.'

'But the size of the place,' exclaimed Shallvar.

'All in keeping with the scale of everything else. Of course, to the builders this may seem quite compact.'

'We are in the realm of giants,' Modeenus muttered tremulously. 'Such devices are not fit for men.'

'When and how was this place built?' Krestus asked. 'Who could do this to our world without our knowing?'

'Oh, I think this may have been here for some time,' said the Doctor, peering intently at the globe in the centre of the vast control room. 'From here no doubt they can monitor what goes on anywhere on the surface . . . and sometimes perhaps interfere,' he added, almost as an afterthought.

'But who are they?' Krestus insisted.

The Doctor's face became grave, as though his fascination with their discovery was tinged with an unaccountable sadness.

'I'm not certain, of course, but I suspect -' 'Wait . . . what's that?' said Draga, pointing. Something nebulous was emerging from concealment beyond the central globe, moving low across the inverted landscape of the far side of the control console as a cloud might do the floor of a valley when seen from a mountainside. Except that this cloud glowed from within as

brightly as the controls themselves, and it flowed purposefully with deliberate billows and swirls. Even as they watched, fingers of light stabbed down from its underside to trail across the control board, causing indicators to flicker and pulse in response.

'It's . . . alive,' said Shallvar in wonderment.

'Oh yes, most definitely,' the Doctor confirmed. 'A form of electromagnetically organized plasma, I suspect.'

'And ... it built this place?' Draga ventured.

'Well it probably had some help, but it's obvious the controls have been designed for beings like that. They're clearly light activated, providing an interface between optical wavelengths and gross physical matter.'

It flowed nearer, from their viewpoint rising up the over-curving inner sphere. They saw sparkling multicolored pulses of fight within the cloud forming complex, ever-shifting patterns. Then it swept under their feet, covering the shaft mouth and eclipsing the light from the central globe. It must have been a mile across. Jamie felt a slight tingling and his hair stood on end. The air crackled and there was a soft whispering like the distant wind hissing and shrilling across the crags.

Then the fantastic thing disappeared from sight beneath their feet. Krestus was standing with his arms outstretched and wings spread as though preparing to fly out into the void.

'I am blessed ... it is a God of Light!'

Twenty-Seven

he map of the highlands recording the spread of the Tnew Animus web had been lying in front of them for what seemed like hours before Yostor pointed out the obvious. Nallia had just marked a section of web the fleet had managed to isolate and burn back when he pointed.

'Surely this crater here, close to the centre of the infestation, is the location of the replica pod plants where the tunnel emerges.'

Annolos and Torth looked at the map then at each other.

'He's right!'

'By great Omnimon, why didn't we see that?'

And they began speaking so rapidly and excitedly that Victoria had to intervene and translate for the Menoptera.

'That thing must have sent a tentacle or something all the way through the tunnel from its island,' Annolos explained.

'That's what it's been doing while we were waiting for it to advance overland.'

'The tunnel end was blocked,' Yostor reminded him.

'Well it's unblocked it - it's certainly big enough. Or maybe some leftover web men cleared it. They've had the time.'

'Now it's got a second front opened up and we're caught between them,' Torth said.

Nallia was now scrutinizing the map closely.

'But the tunnel also runs under the settlement from which I made my escape,' she pointed out, 'yet there has been no report of web in that area.'

'Maybe the upper levels there are still too badly blocked, or else it wanted to get further inland before emerging.'

'I've got this picture in my mind of a great oily grey tentacle oozing through that tunnel, feeding the far end like a plant root,' said Annolos slowly.

'Well?'

'Well what if we cut it? It's protected deep underground everywhere else, and at the far end it protects itself. But if a way through the lower levels of that settlement could be cleared we could drop a charge right on top of it before it knew what was happening. It may not even realize we know the exact route of the tunnel, so why should it expect anyone to drop in on it? And if we can cut it we may kill this new "bud" or whatever it is and give a jolt to the main core at the same time.'

'It is a possibility,' Nallia agreed, 'but we cannot spare many from their assigned posts.'

'Just needs a small party. We can do it ourselves.'

It only took Nallia a second to decide.

'We shall attempt this. Please bring one of the warheads the Doctor left behind while I arrange a shuttle.'

'What about those two Optera we were with?' Torth suggested. 'We might need them if we have to dig through any roof falls. Less noisy than blasting charges.'

'I shall find them.'

'And I'm coming as well,' Victoria said firmly. 'I'm sure I can fire one of those pistol things, or at least keep a lookout.

I'd rather do anything than just wait around here uselessly.'

Torth managed a tired grin.

'She's still as bossy as when we saw her in that cage the first time, isn't she?'

They had to drag Krestus away from the shaft mouth, which was not an easy task in the almost weightless conditions. The Doctor led them into the maze of circuitry connections that lay directly under the glowing control panels. They stumbled and bounced through a shining forest of glassy stems which arched and twisted over their heads, sometimes branching or combining and connecting with other peculiar nodules and units before 254

gathering into bunches and running away into sub-levels above them.

They didn't stop until they were two hundred yards from the shaft edge and Krestus had stopped struggling. They put him down and he covered his face with his hands.

'It was a God of Light . . .' he moaned. 'How could you keep me from him?'

The Doctor stood over the stricken Menoptera and spoke with an edge to his words that Jamie rarely heard.

'Whatever that creature was, it was no God.'

'I know what I saw.'

'Do you really? Believe me, I do not want to take away your beliefs or dreams, but as a friend I cannot let this continue. Listen: are your Gods of Light all powerful, omnipotent?'

'If they choose so.'

'Then what does it need all this gross physical machinery for? Unless it did not build this place, in which case what is it doing here apparently taking readings from the controls?

As you said earlier, why should a God need such devices?'

Krestus stiffened. The Doctor continued.

'Remember the collection of Vortisian life in the gallery up in the shaft? It, or beings like it, must have taken them.

When your legends speak of the Gods visiting Vortis it was to secure such samples. They even know how to attract you to them by radiating certain frequencies of light to which your minds are susceptible, but not to be transported to heaven. You must fight it. Your life is not over just because they want another specimen!'

Then, surprisingly, Modeenus laid a hand on the Menoptera's shoulder.

'My God Omnimon does not live in the sun,' he admitted.

'That is an ancient superstition, though many of the lower classes still take it literally. The truth is within you. Find that and you will know where your God lies.' He stared off into nothing for a moment. 'I used to know. . . but now I am not so certain. Where is he and what does he 255

want of me? I have been denied the chance to destroy the Animus. Perhaps this was intended. Perhaps even this ungodly place of outsider machines has its purpose.'

Gradually Krestus straightened up and faced the others.

'I . . . will think on what you have said,' he promised.

'Meanwhile, what do we do next?' asked Shallvar.

'Try to communicate with it, of course,' said the Doctor.

'How do we communicate with a thing that size, even if we could speak its language?'

'And would it listen if we could?' Draga added.

The Doctor was looking about him intently.

'Optical wiring is quite easily cut, even on this scale. It may be possible to adjust some of the controls to call attention to ourselves. Let's see what we can find . . .'

He wandered off through the strange illuminated forest with the others trailing after him. They had not gone a hundred yards when the light guides thinned out. Before them was a void in the control circuitry half filled with a glass tank the size of a mansion house. Through its transparent walls they could see a hinged lid that would allow access from the surface of the control console.

Mounted around the tank were huge mechanisms connected to the light guides that looked to Jamie like great cannon.

The Doctor seemed excited by the discovery, and circled the structure in great leaping bounds.

'Do you see?' he called out. 'A secondary hatch to allow specimens to go to and from the storage area up in the shaft

- that's the conveyor track leading away over there. And these must be the camera projectors of an imaging system.

And with a dual feedback capability. It's so useful being able to see all the details like this . . .' He fumbled in his pocket for a pen, pulled up a sleeve and began making notes on his cuff.

The others caught up with him.

'How is this thing going to help us?' Draga demanded.

'And what is it?' Jamie added.

The Doctor blinked, as though surprised they had not seen the obvious.

'Well it's a sort of microscope system, of course. The subject is put in the tank and an image is expanded to a scale that the plasma beings can see clearly. That's why it's near the shaft leading to the specimen store, I expect. All we have to do is cut a few of these connections - they're a sort of plastic, so your energy pistols should manage that easily enough — so we can operate it from below. There's also a feedback imager which can be used to project an external image back into the tank for simulated visual/tactile interaction with the subject.' Jamie was looking bemused.

The Doctor said slowly and clearly, 'I can send a moving picture of myself into the inner chamber on a scale large enough for that creature in there to see, while I can also see a picture of it at the same time.'

'Oh, aye, that sort of thing,' Jamie said, still lost.

'But how will you communicate with it?' Shallvar wondered.

'I'm sure I'll manage something. Now if you could adjust your weapons

to narrow beams . . .'

For the next few minutes they cut and spliced the light guides as the Doctor bustled about giving directions. Jamie discovered that playing the beam of a gun over them lightly made them easier to bend and reposition. Soon a row of severed ends hung beside the microscope chamber like drunken organ pipes, each labelled in the Doctor's neat writing on its cut face. Draga and Shallvar stood before them with torches set to maximum power.

'Right, open the chamber,' the Doctor called.

Draga flashed her torch down the appropriate cable before her. The hatch mechanism hummed and the rear tank door opened.

'Excellent,' said the Doctor, clapping his hands together in delight. 'Now just follow the sequence I gave you.'

He stepped through the barn-door-sized hatch with Jamie looking on anxiously.

'Are you sure it's safe, Doctor?'

'Of course. The process can't be dangerous to the specimens. Close the hatch.'

Draga illuminated a second cable. The hatch swung shut.

Jamie noticed the fit was not all that tight. Well at least he won't suffocate in there, he thought. Shallvar now began actuating his controls. The cannon-like objects beside the tank glowed into life and the whole interior was illuminated in a bluish radiance.

'Project!' the Doctor called, his voice muffled by the tank walls.

A ghostly curved floor seemed to spring into being around the Doctor, and Jamie realized it was a representa-tion of the inner sphere reduced to human proportions.

Curiously he peered out and down through the tank wall and outer hatch into the chamber itself. There was a monstrous form out there of which for a moment he could make no sense. Then he realized he was looking up at a huge shoe and a section of crumpled trouser leg. The Doctor's magnified mile-high image was standing on the control

console.

Within the tank they saw the Doctor extend his arms peaceably as the image of the cloud being drifted into view.

The creature rippled as though a gust of wind was trying to tear it apart. For a moment sparkles of multicoloured light flashed wildly about its body. Then it contracted into an almost perfect ball and shot away towards the central globe.

There was a flash of coalescence, then it was gone, leaving the Doctor's surprised image standing alone in the control chamber.

The Menoptera scoutship touched down on the clear ground before the settlement.

Victoria climbed down the hatch steps with the others and paused for a moment to take in the familiar pigeonholed cliff face. Only a few days ago she had stood here with Jamie and the Doctor. How much had happened in the interval!

They formed up with Morg and Zenor, flanked by a couple of Menoptera soldiers leading, then Annolos and Torth carrying the warhead in a sling between them, and Nallia, Yostor and herself bringing up the rear. The 258

energy pistol felt heavy in her hand. She had almost no knowledge of weapons but strangely had no doubt that she could use it if necessary. The Animus and its web creatures inspired no compassion or fellow feeling. There was a quality of utter alienness and antipathy about it that made the Menoptera and Rhumon seem close cousins by comparison. Perhaps they were beginning to realize the same thing.

Nallia directed them to the tunnel mouth she had emerged from during her escape from the demolition charges, and they cautiously entered and started down the ramp beyond.

It was deathly quiet, which was disconcerting but possibly a good sign. As they descended Victoria sniffed.

'I can smell damp,' she whispered. 'I don't remember it being that strong before.'

'Neither was it when I escaped,' Nallia confirmed.

'Perhaps the explosions released a spring from the rocks.'

The main corridor of the first level below ground was wet underfoot, with the sand swirled into heaps in the corners, and the light of their torches glittered off a tidemark halfway up the walls. They found the next ramp down.

'This is the level I was on when the charges went off,'

Nallia explained as they descended. 'Much of it collapsed.

We may have to make a way through.' As it turned out there was no need.

The floor below was strewn with rocks and pebbles, some heaped into substantial piles, growing higher as they made their way along to the next ramp. Pools of water were trapped between them. Soon they were scrambling over heaps that had them ducking their heads to clear the ceiling.

Then Nallia stopped them abruptly.

'This is not as it was. I am sure the way was totally blocked from here before, but now . . .' She shone her torch ahead. The heaps of debris brushed the ceiling in places, but there was clearly room to crawl through- Victoria thought everything looked almost smooth-swept.

'Way through easy,' said Morg. 'No need we to dig.'

'Wait a moment,' said Torth. 'I want to understand this before we go any further. How did the fall get cleared and where did all this water come from? If there was a spring why isn't it still flowing?'

'I think I know what's happened,' said Annolos. 'Remember that image I had of a tentacle sliding through the tunnel? Well suppose the tentacle is huge, and only just fits the tunnel, which had been flooded from the crater end when the rim wall was blasted. The Animus pushes it through the tunnel, forcing the water ahead of it like a piston in a cylinder. Where does the water go?'

'Of course! Out of the first weak point it can find, pushing aside anything that gets in its way . . . but the force must have been incredible.'

'You've seen the size of that thing. Unless we want it to get bigger and stronger we'd better get going.'

They scrambled through the narrow gap. The way beyond was choked to the ceiling with debris and pools of trapped water, and the clear path twisted and dipped about the remains of the tunnel and the ramp shaft. But always there was a way. The huge volume of water that had been forced through the passages and had then drained back again ensured that. Gradually they began to feel a vibration through the rocks about them, rather like the drumming of water flowing through a pipe. The descent became almost vertical, sliding down loose heaps of stones and over larger boulders. Suddenly Zenor signalled for caution. They carefully dragged the warhead up to a ridge of shale and peered over. Beyond was darkness, punctuated by dripping and the regular heavy wash of water against stone. The pulsing vibration was much louder.

Torth adjusted his torch to a narrow beam and shone it over the barrier. It played across a spacious vaulted ceiling supported by tapering columns of stone. Everywhere glistened. He lowered the beam and it touched black water criss-crossed by ripples and wavelets. He swung it to one side — and Victoria gasped.

A long grey tube, perhaps fifteen feet across, lay half 260

submerged in the water, stretching from one side of the cavern to the other. Dim shadows flowed under its slimy translucent skin, driven by contractions pulsating regularly along its length. It could only be a tentacle-root of the Animus.

'That's it!' Torth hissed, shining his torch about the rest of the cavern. There was no other sign of life. 'All clear. Keep watch while we place this thing as close as we can.'

Nallia directed Morg and Zenor back up the tunnel as a rear guard, while the Menoptera soldiers scrambled over the ridge and down the rocky slope on the far side, rifles at the ready, scanning the corners of the flooded cavern. Victoria grasped her own pistol more tightly and snatched glances back the way they had come, but it was all dark and still.

Torth and Annolos, dragging the warhead in its sling after them, made their way carefully to the water's edge.

'Can't rely on a remote trigger with all this rock,' said Torth. 'Better use delayed action.' 'How long?'

'Countdown from five hundred. That'll give us long enough to get clear.'

Annolos set the timer clamped to the base of the warhead and closed a switch. The two of them slid the heavy cone forward into the water and pushed it towards the great pulsating tentacle. For a moment Victoria saw it glitter, then it vanished silently into the depths. Annolos and Torth started back, waving to the others to withdraw.

A grey creature surged up out of the water and lunged forward, catching one of the Menoptera soldiers as he turned. Torth twisted and fired, burning one of the thing's arms off. The creature jerked the Menoptera aside to crash limply to the ground and kept on coming as another of its kind emerged. Nallia and Yostor fired at it and Victoria, trembling, copied them. The creature began to blacken and smoulder, then fell into twitching pieces. A third grey creature burst from the waters. The remaining Menoptera soldier took off in a snap of wings, circled over the water and dropped a firebomb. Wreathed in

flames, the creature sank back under the water. As the Menoptera headed back for the shale beach, a massive grey arm rose clear of the water clutching a rock, and threw it with inhuman strength. The missile caught the Menoptera in the back, smashing one wing. He fluttered out of the air to splash awkwardly a few feet from the shore. Annolos ran forward, hand outstretched. Grey arms reached up from below to encircle the struggling Menoptera. There was a splash and he was gone.

'It's no use - get back up here!' Nallia called, even as more arms rose from the water to hurl rocks. Torth and Yostor began to scramble desperately up the loose shale as the others fired over their heads, the bolts bursting in geysers of steam across the water. They were almost at the top when a rock smashed into Annolos's leg. He crumpled with a yell of pain and toppled backwards, rolling and sliding down the slope in a shower of stones, clawing desperately to check his descent. Torth immediately plunged recklessly after him.

Annolos hit the bottom and began to struggle groggily to his feet, scrabbling for his lost gun. A grey creature rose from the water and shambled towards him. They burned it but it did not stop. Annolos screamed as a stinging web hand crushed his arm, and they dared not risk firing again. Torth slithered to a stop at the bottom of the slope, recovered his balance and fired from closer range at maximum power, burning a leg off the creature. It toppled onto its side like a felled tree, but did not release its hold. Hauling itself along with two arms and one leg, it dragged Annolos towards the water. Torth scrambled

forward, trying to find an angle for a clear line of fire, but Annolos's kicking, writhing body was in the way.

The grey creature splashed into the water.

'No! Torth . . . please!' Annolos screamed.

As Annolos disappeared Torth shot him with a stun blast.

Torth remained immobile for a second, gun still levelled at the spreading rings on the water. A grey hulk half surfaced close by. He reset his gun and burned it. Then he was 262

blazing away wildly at the arms in the water and the great limb of the Animus that lay out across the dark pool.

'Torth! It's no use!' Victoria shouted in horror, flinching aside as the thrown rocks continued to shatter about them.

The great limb of the Animus trembled. Torth turned to run but it was too late. A tentacle as thick as a man's thigh lashed out of the water in a shower of spray, caught him about the waist and lifted him into the air, kicking futilely.

'Go! Go!' he choked out, the breath being squeezed from his body.

Precisely, mercifully, as Torth had done for the comrade who had been his enemy, Nallia shot him with a heavy stun blast.

His limp body vanished into the swirling water.

Grey creatures began to haul themselves up onto the tiny scree-slope beach.

Numbly Victoria felt the two Menoptera pull at her and she stumbled away. She was aware of Nallia unclipping a demolition charge from her belt and ramming it into the loose rock. Then they were scrambling and clawing their way back up towards the upper levels and the light of day once more. There was boom and roar behind them and she felt a pressure wave blast past them so that her ears popped.

There came the sound of falling rock, then silence. They stumbled on.

Despite her shock and disgust Victoria realized there was a steady count going on in some calm detached part of her brain that concerned itself only with survival. It had started at five hundred just

before the warhead had slid beneath the waters of the subterranean pool and it continued to diminish. Would the Animus realize what they had done?

Could the grey creatures find and defuse the bomb in time?

She became aware of Nallia calling out to Morg and Zenor to start back towards the surface. There was no reply. They slithered down the last of the spoil heaps and stopped short.

The corridor looked like a charnel house.

Morg and Zenor, bloody and torn, lay quite still amid the remains of at least two grey creatures, the fragments of which twitched and squirmed with their unnatural independent life. The two Optera soil had their digging spikes clasped in their hands with grips that had survived beyond life itself. Victoria swayed, feeling sick, and even Nallia seemed momentarily incapable of crossing the ghastly mess before her. Yostor grabbed them by the arms.

'Who is to sing their names if we do not live to tell how bravely they died? Come, follow me!'

He led them through the terrible remains and then they were sprinting on, desperate to leave the sight and sound of death behind them. Up the ramp and along the next corridor.

Nallia pulled a crystal communicator set from her belt and called into it:

'Attention scoutship: enemy constructs in tunnels. Prepare to lift.'

There was no reply.

'It may still be blocked by the rock,' she panted as they continued on and upward. Somewhere behind them rock fell with a clatter and rumble. They ran faster.

A grey creature was silhouetted in the tunnel mouth at the top of the last ramp waiting for them. Her reflex was slower than those of the others but Victoria found she had helped to burn it down before it had taken a step towards them. It was frightening what anger and fear could make you capable of.

They burst through into daylight again. The scoutship was resting as they had left it — except that a grey creature stood at the foot of its open hatchway and another before its cabin windows. Of its crew there was no sign.

Nallia and Yostor caught Victoria under the arms. Their wings spread and suddenly the ground was falling away beneath her feet. As they strove for height she looked back.

The creatures had made no move to stop them. They were just standing there . . . waiting.

Like the head of a great snake, the sinuous form of an Animus tentacle slithered out of the tunnel they had just left.

The growth was already thicker than it had been only 264

minutes before when it had taken Torth. There was a swelling at its head. It reared up as though searching the sky for them. The bulbous tip opened like a petal bursting from its bud and a white light glowed within.

She felt the invisible gravity beam tug at them, halting their flight, and begin to pull them backward despite the frantic beating of the Menoptera wings.

We're going to die, Victoria thought starkly.

Suddenly the force vanished.

Below them the tentacle whiplashed across the open ground, smashing into the side of the scoutship, and lay still.

Its severed end burst from the tunnel mouth propelled by a spout of fire. Plumes of smoke and flame erupted from every aperture across the cliff face. The whole mountainside heaved and seemed to dissolve into a cloud of dust. There came the sound of a tumultuous explosion.

Then the shockwave caught them and tumbled them through the sky like dead leaves.

Twenty-Eight

ris and Ilex were searching amid the billowing dust Bclouds and multitudinous jewelled suns of their home star cluster with grim determination. Thanks to Twel the project world was again threatened by unplanned external contamination as it headed into an inhabited star system. Even though they had now set the automatic drive control to counteract his earlier course change, irreparable damage might already have been done to the biosphere and the cold micro-organic life-form development they were studying.

So they continued on, assiduously probing every likely hiding place for the saboteur.

Then there was a confusion of emotional radiation and their quarry unexpectedly arrived at great speed, making no attempt at concealment and emitting sensations of fear and panic indiscriminately across half the spectrum.

'Alert. Danger. Project centre infested. Alien presence within.' Twel said rapidly, circling about them in ragged disorder, almost losing several streamers of body mass to the warm solar wind.

'Recommend Twel abandon pretence of alarm,' Bris said dismissively.

'Then inform Bris/self immediately of any additional interference with project world systems,' Ilex added.

Before Twel could explain further, they all felt the calm presence and power of an elder mind approaching. An adult plasma form under perfect inner control projected itself into their midst, traction fields breaking its forward motion precisely against the star cluster's energy gradient. There was no mistaking who it was.

266

(Priority request): 'Bris/Ilex/Twel. Relate complete explanation current circumstances' (query). 'Elucidate immediately term: "project world",' Tutor Oryl demanded.

267

Twenty-Nine

octor, what happened?' Jamie demanded, pressing D his his face against the glass wall. 'Where did the cloud thing go?'

Inside the imaging tank the Doctor turned towards them, his brows knitted in puzzlement. Outside in the control sphere his mile-high image mimicked his actions precisely.

'It's really most odd,' he admitted. 'Almost as if it was afraid of me. But no creature capable of building all this would react so primitively, unless . . .' His gaze became vacant once more.

'But it simply vanished into that globe,' said Draga.

'Oh, that's easily explained. It's actually the aperture to a hyperspacial tunnel, but you're only seeing its three dimensional aspect. The point of gravitational negation at the centre of Vortis would be an ideal place to locate it. The plasma creature has probably gone through it back to the star cluster core, I should think. That's where such beings normally live.'

'You might as well come out of there now,' Shallvar said.

'No. Boost the power to the projector. If I can make my image bright enough it can interact with the controls, once I've deciphered the symbols on them.'

'And you can turn off the isocryte drive and let us resume our attack on the Animus?'

'Possibly - or I may find something better. You can monitor all of Vortis from here. Anyway, please increase the power. The bank of cables to your right . . . that's it.'

The giant image outside glowed more brightly and 268

took on a misty solidity. In the tank they saw the Doctor bending over the matching image of the spherical shell of controls, touching contacts lightly and frowning, then moving on to another section. As the minutes passed Shallvar began to fret.

'A typical scientist. Doesn't he realize there's no time for experimentation? We have a plan and we should carry it through as soon as possible.'

'Now just give the Doctor a chance,' Jamie said loyally.

'He has his own way of doing things I grant, but it all usually works out right in the end.'

'The Doctor has my confidence also,' Krestus said slowly.

'His wisdom helped save us once before, and I see no reason to doubt it now.'

'So he really was here hundreds of years ago?' Draga pondered. 'It's hard to believe.'

'Ah,' said the Doctor loudly, beaming with evident satisfaction. 'I think that will do it . . .' They saw screens light up in the console, and their images suddenly swelled to fill the opposite wall of the tank.

It was an aerial view of a section of Vortis as seen from space. Jamie saw a jumble of dark highlands, plains, giant craters and the glittering of scattered shallow seas.

'A paraoptical signal bounced off the ionosphere,' the Doctor explained. 'I think I can focus on the area we are concerned with . . .' He bent and touched another control.

The landscape rushed at them, swelling and flowing off the edges of the screen, then steadied. Jamie recognized an arm of the highlands with a sea bordering one side and a great barren plain on the other. A grey shadow lay across the sea, extending many arms from its centre like some great spider. Already a tendril had touched the far shore and a grey veil was spreading across the land there. He did not need to be told what it was. His gaze passed over the familiar highlands of the former Rhumon-held lands and the buffer zone — and froze.

'What's that doing there?'

An isolated irregular stain of grey dulled the highlands, 269

muting the contrast of shadow and highlight, drawing the colour from the flower forests. It must have been many miles across. Even as they watched in dismay he was sure he could see its edges spreading further.

'Are you sure you'll be able to fly again?' Victoria asked anxiously, looking at Nallia's and Yostor's wings. 'It doesn't.

. . hurt?'

The explosion had sent them tumbling through the air for half a mile. Somehow they had all clung together and the forest canopy and the soft ground had broken their fall.

Miraculously they had escaped with no more than minor injuries, but the two Menoptera's wings were torn and sadly crumpled.

'As before, the veins are all intact, that is the main thing,'

Nallia assured her. 'But we will not be able to fly again for a few risings.'

'Well then,' Victoria said, trying to sound purposeful and resolute despite her shaken nerves, 'we'd better start walking. I want to get as far away from that dreadful place as soon as possible.'

'The arm of the Animus must have been destroyed,'

Yostor reminded her.

'Yes, but what if some of those grey creatures survived and come after us?'

'We shall move on soon enough,' Nallia said. 'But first I must contact base.' She took out her communicator and adjusted a control.

'Sub-leader Nallia to Strikeforce control. Report on secondary Animus growth.'

An excited anxious voice replied.

'We thought we had lost you, Sub-leader. Did your plan fail?'

'No. At great cost we succeeded ... Is the Animus bud not dead?'

'The main core out at sea remains unchanged. The attack force reported what may have been a spasm running throughout the body of the secondary mass, but it continues to grow . . .' There was a pause, then: 'The 270

latest report says its centre has shifted. It has become mobile

... it is heading towards the canyon.'

'Defend your position as long as you can but prepare for evacuation,' Nallia directed firmly.

'But what of your party? There is no signal from your craft.'

'It is lost and we are unable to fly. But you must not risk sending a craft to collect us. We shall find our own way back. Communication

ends.'

She replaced her communicator on her belt.

Victoria felt close to tears.

'It's still alive? After all those brave people died? For nothing! That's... so unfair!'

'It is war,' Nallia said simply. 'When we have time we shall mourn them.' She glanced at the sky to orientate herself. 'Now we shall walk. We shall circle to approach the base from the side opposite the Animus.'

They set off through the forest.

The Doctor was standing outside the image tank arguing with Shallvar and Draga.

'Yes, I have identified the controls for the planetary drive, but now we know the Animus has divided, the original plan may no longer be feasible. With two foci of hyperspatial interference on the surface I may not be able to track down either precisely enough for our purposes.'

'Then what can we do?' Shallvar demanded.

'Give me a little more time to understand the rest of the controls.'

'Time is just what we don't have,' Draga said, but the Doctor had already returned to the imaging tank.

Victoria plodded on beside the two Menoptera through miles of forest, her thoughts wandering. Spiritually she was at about the lowest ebb she could ever remember. Worry about the Doctor and Jamie, the dreadful memory of the cavern, the ever-present danger. . . She had tried to be brave and had discovered unexpected personal reserves of determination and willpower. But

there was something she would always lack: an appetite for adventure. Jamie had it in full measure but she did not. She wanted the comfort and security of a stable home once more. She wanted ... a change.

Yostor called them to a halt, disturbing her reverie. She saw him

staring intently ahead of them, his antennae shivering slightly. A tiny fleet of iridescent glittering fliers appeared and zipped over their heads.

'There is something wrong,' he announced slowly.

A rippling millipede, small cousin to the creature Victoria had ridden days before, wound its way out of the undergrowth ahead and flowed rapidly past them. A couple of huge beetle-like creatures followed it, then all was still again. In fact, she realized, the perpetual buzz and chitter of the flower forest was unusually muted.

No, there was another sound.

A faint rustling whisper.

The far end of the winding track ahead of them became slightly misty . . . 'Web!' Nallia cried. 'Run!'

It was as though they retreated before an advancing snow cloud. A buzzard of grey billowed whispering, fizzing, hissing after them, coating everything in its path. Leaves shrivelled at its touch, branches sagged and bowed down under the myriad tendrils snaking forward like ivy whose growth had been accelerated a thousandfold. And each strand was spinning a new cobweb from the substance it consumed, smothering all other life but its own.

Victoria ran desperately till her heart thudded and her throat was raw with each new breath. Her vision clouded and her legs began to feel numb beyond the pain of every pounding step. She swayed drunkenly, knowing any moment she would fall.

Then there was a great mass before her and she realized it was an outcrop of rock thrusting up through the forest canopy. She dimly heard Nallia shouting at her to climb, and suddenly she was scrabbling upwards, heedless of torn nails or bruised shins even as the grey shroud washed about them and lapped at the base of the rock. Still 272

she struggled upward rubber-legged, snatching glances below. A thicker tendril of web rose like a snake behind her faster than she could climb. Her strength failed as it drew level and she froze in utter horror, unable to scream or to take her eyes off the tip of the tendril as it swelled into a bud fuzzy with fine web.

And then the bud rippled.

For a second she saw in it the caricature of a Rhumon face apparently peering intently into her own. Then it dissolved into itself and the tendril slithered back to merge with the heaving mass of web below them.

Nallia and Yostor reached down to catch her hands, and a moment later she lay gasping on the smooth summit of the rock.

The Doctor was working his way methodically across the control console, testing switches, indicators and displays, writing more notes on his cuffs, occasionally sharing his latest discovery with them. They had all joined him in the tank after reconnecting the severed light guides and wedging the hatch open. Jamie was surprised how natural it felt. From his point of view the control room had simply been shrunk to a more human scale. The most unusual aspect was walking his image around the inside of the sphere in defiance of even the trace gravity within and seeing the others apparently hanging upside down over his head. The Doctor told him not to behave frivolously.

Finally the Doctor rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

'I believe I have identified all the planetary environmental controls. Now I will attempt to use them against the Animus.'

'What, you mean make bad weather? That's hardly likely to trouble it,' Draga said angrily.

'I have in mind something rather more dramatic.

Tremendous power is being drawn through the hyperspatial tunnel to keep Vortis alive. Without this it would have frozen solid in interstellar space. We saw some of the uses the power is put to on the upper level. That blue 273

sparkling cube was ice: frozen air and water to replace any losses due to the lower gravity. Heat, gas and water vapour are constantly ejected through vents all over the surface.' He looked at them with guilty excitement. 'Well now, what do you think that huge glowing red sphere contained?'

They sat back to back at the centre of the very top of the rock, speaking only in whispers. All around them was a grey sea of web. A deathly silence hung over the land, disturbed only by an occasional muffled crack and billow as a smothered tree collapsed.

'The Animus must have sent out tendrils to encircle the Canyon of

Spires,' Nallia said. 'It was our misfortune to encounter one while still far from the base.'

'Can't you call them up — get them to send a ship for us?'

said Victoria, her voice still tremulous. She could not get the image of the web face from her mind, and hadn't mentioned it to the others. Had she imagined it?

'I dare not request a ship to fly low over the web. We know what happens to them. We must just wait.'

'Until we starve, or it realizes we're here and . . . eats us!'

'Perhaps, when our wings have healed, we may be able to slip away unnoticed.'

'But by then how far will it have spread?'

The rock seemed to sway slightly and from somewhere came a deep bass rumble. Victoria gave a little gasp.

'Is Vortis moving again?'

'No,' said Yostor. 'Look there.'

A plume of smoke was visible on the horizon, rising from the summit of a grey-shrouded mountain peak. A flicker of red appeared as fire licked up around it and began to work its way steadily down the slope.

'A volcano,' exclaimed Victoria incredulously. 'The lava is flowing down the sides — it's burning the web!'

'One volcano will make little difference,' Yostor pointed out.

But even as he spoke there came a sharper rumble from 274

closer to hand. A small crater in the middle distance suddenly erupted in a roaring fountain of smoke and steam.

The web surrounding it wrinkled away from its scorching discharge. Then came the thunderous rush of an eruption behind them. In minutes there were twenty plumes of smoke and fire dotted across the grey-wreathed forest. The clear air began to mist over and the stars twinkled and vanished behind a growing pall of smoke. Fires spread as the web began burning back to the thicker main tendrils, which

thrashed about, flinching away from geysers of molten rock.

'Is this usual for Vortis?' Victoria asked, coughing as the acrid fumes billowed about them.

'I have never known such activity,' said Nallia. 'But it is certainly discomforting the Animus. Perhaps the Gods smile on us at last. If the web retreats far enough we may be able to continue our escape. I will readily risk fire rather than the web.'

'Look! It's moving.'

Blackened tentacles were slithering away past the base of the rock and back in the direction they had come, stirring up clouds of ash as they went. Victoria began to laugh and sob in relief at the same time. They were going to be safe! They were going . . .

She choked into silence, eyes widening.

A great tentacle had just lifted clear of the ground and drifted over their heads, writhing slowly. There was a curious iridescent flickering motion about its edges, like thousands of fine beating hairs. She'd once seen a minute sea creature on a microscope slide with the same shimmering fringe about it: cilia, they were called. Except these cilia must contain isocryte. Through the smoke they saw more tentacles rising, casting shadows across the drifting smoke, lifting clear of the streams of fire.

Like some vast sea anemone cut loose from its rock, the Animus was learning to fly.

The Doctor shut off the volcanoes hastily.

'Oh dear, that's not what I meant to happen at all.'

'What's it doing?' Jamie asked, squinting at the image on the screen through the pall of volcanic smoke.

'Responding and adapting to external stimuli, I'm afraid.

The eruptions have just made it move on to the next phase in its development inconveniently early. This part of it at least is using the isocryte for self-propulsion, as I warned it would do. It can fly anywhere on Vortis now.'

'And then into space?' Draga said. 'I'm afraid so.'

'You have given the evil one wings,' Modeenus said.

'I didn't mean to,' the Doctor snapped back defensively.

'Now let me see how to stop it.' He hunched down over the controls.

'Doctor .. .' Jamie said, tapping him on the shoulder.

'Don't bother me now, Jamie, I must concentrate.'

'Doctor — we've got company!'

The Doctor spun round.

Four of the glowing cloud beings had emerged from the hyperspatial tunnel, and their faithfully reproduced images drifted about the tank. Three were similar to the original one they had encountered and stayed clear of them, billowing and swirling irregularly in a manner Jamie couldn't help thinking seemed almost nervous. The fourth was slightly larger and held itself in a tighter, more compact form. Even as they watched, it glided up to them, smoothly elongated itself into an ellipsoid of man height and began to display complicated patterns of light across its surface.

'Look,' the Doctor said with delight, 'it's trying to communicate!'

'But what's it saying?' Draga asked anxiously, her hand automatically moving to her Roistered pistol.

'Wait a moment, I'm concentrating,' said the Doctor, plucking at his lip and frowning at the lights.

'And how can you talk back anyway?' Jamie pointed out practically. 'You can't reply in kind, that's for sure.'

But the Doctor had closed his eyes, as though listening to a voice beyond their range of hearing. Slowly he 276

extended his hands until they touched the surface of the ellipsoid. The lights flashed faster.

Twel, Bris and Ilex watched Tutor Oryl attempt to communicate with the magnified image of the cold-bodied, microscopic being occupying the project control room. The five other similar grotesque images that hung close by did nothing to reassure them. How could such creatures

have got in here? And why were they wasting their time on them?

(Supposition): 'Twel was frightened by a projection,' Bris observed.

'Twel deserved fright,' Ilex agreed.

Twel refrained from comment.

The being Oryl had attempted to communicate with had become agitated. It made strange gestures with its limbs, beckoning Oryl to a display screen used for reviewing the operating programs of the project's automatic maintenance machines. The being began operating the controls with surprising speed for something of gross matter, even allowing for its massless image. Incredibly, word images in basic began to appear on the screen. It had actually comprehended their tutor's communication. Text scrolled up the screen and Oryl studied it closely, then focused on Twel.

(Priority demand): 'State truthfully where Twel-constructed synthesis/ contaminant for Bris/Ilex project was obtained' (authority emphasis).

Twel hesitantly switched to adult mode.

(Admission): 'Self did not create contaminant. Seed found on home cluster perimeter. Placed in Bris/Ilex project environment to satisfy self-curiosity.' Twel couldn't help adding, 'Seed still functioning' (query).

'Prior supposition self/Ilex confirmed,' Bris said angrily.

'Twel not capable of creating synthesis.'

Oryl's attention turned to Bris and Ilex and the students abruptly assumed respectful body countenances.

(Attention/warning): 'Bris/Ilex will attend self later, subject unauthorized neo-biology experiments.' (Immediate priority): 'Self to correct situation in project experimental 277

zone. Both indigenous experimental and extraneous life forms endangered by alien seed growth.'

Bris asked humbly.

(Request guidance): 'Explain necessity of intervention'

(query).

Oryl responded tersely.

(Important information): 'One: alien seed identified as on prohibited-contact list; expulsion/termination mandatory.

Two: though experimental micro-organic forms ephemeral/primitive/insignificant, Elder Council ruling states they may have purpose in cosmic order.' (Consequence): 'Preserve existence where possible.'

The larger plasma being made another show of lights at the Doctor, then smoothly dived through the service shaft and disappeared. Jamie and the rest eyed the Doctor impatiently.

'What happened? You understood it?'

'Well enough,' admitted the Doctor, pinching the bridge of his nose and then rubbing his temples as though he had a headache. 'It used one-way telepathy to give me a sort of basic language course. Fortunately the being who just left is a teacher. It's going up to the surface to deal with the Animus. Apparently one of its students carelessly let its precursor loose in some other student's xenobiology study project.'

'Students . . . project?' Krestus said slowly. 'This is all some sort of . . . experiment?'

The Doctor looked at him sorrowfully

'My friend, all of Vortis is an unauthorized student research project.' Krestus held his hands up to his chest, palms outward, as though to protect himself from the words.

The Doctor continued gently: 'They must have taken your primitive ancestors from your true native world many generations ago and made a new home for them here to study their development in isolation. Rather carelessly actually. For instance, they let some isocryte spill during the construction of their drive chambers and it contaminated the surface. In a way, you

see, they did give you the gift of flight, as your legends say.'

They were all amazed at the revelation, but to Krestus the shock must have been immense. Jamie admired the control he exhibited when he asked calmly, 'All that must have taken thousands of years . . . yet you

said they are but students.'

'Their natural lifespans are measured in millions of years, and their young take a proportionate time to mature. Their time sense is also quite different from ours, and I suspect variable. A hundred years to us might be the equivalent of a lazy summer afternoon to them.'

Krestus had bowed his head as though under the weight of the new knowledge. Modeenus spoke carefully, the hint of a tremor in his voice.

'Doctor, they have the powers of Gods... are you sure they are not? What else might they have created?'

'Once you invoke the supernatural, the infinite and the unknowable, who can be certain of anything? But I suggest it is merely a question of degree. To the tiniest creature any man might seem to be a God.'

'It is true,' Krestus admitted quietly, straightening once again, 'that I looked upon them the second time with less awe and desire to join with them.'

'Then you are already overcoming the attractive reflex and learning to see them as they are,' the Doctor said. 'Now we should watch the screens and see how our new friend deals with the Animus.'

Through the clearing smoke they saw the grey bulk of the Animus coalescing: an octopus drawing in its outlying arms into a fuzz of web, swelling like a monstrous thunderhead of cloud. Victoria was appalled that anything so massive should be able to hang unsupported in the air. Its core must have been fifteen miles away yet its shadow seemed to cover half the land. And it was headed for the Canyon of Spires.

Nallia was speaking urgently into her communicator.

'Canyon base - evacuate! Do not engage Animus. Its core is too well protected by body mass for successful attack.

Respond and acknowledge.' The communicator was silent.

'I hope they have already done the sensible thing,' Nallia said bleakly, her voice flattened by despair. 'For we are beyond any aid now.'

'But what about the Doctor - and your father?' Victoria said with an

effort. 'You told me earlier not to lose hope.

Well I still haven't given up!'

'Even the Doctor is powerless now,' Yostor said gently.

'Our time in the light is over. All that is left is to hide away in burrows once more until the Animus chooses to leave us

... or until all Vortis is laid waste down to the smallest thing that crawls upon the land.'

The Animus settled over the canyon land trailing a grey haze below it like a raincloud. Victoria imagined the tendrils falling from the sky frothing with web, drawing the life from the land. Was that how this world, and others, would end? And when would the monstrous thing, or its twin out at sea, deign to notice them - three tiny frightened creatures who sat together upon a rock and watched the awesome sight in silence because there was nothing left for them to do?

The pearly radiance must have shone over the hills to their left for some moments before it penetrated Victoria's dulled senses.

At first it seemed that a new sun was rising - a full globe of light such as Vortis could not have known for aeons.

Then its intensity grew and she shielded her eyes. Through interlaced fingers she saw sparkles scintillating in glorious colours across its milky surface. Her companions were staring at the apparition in rapt and total concentration, its light glinting in their own expressionless compound eyes.

'Is it . . . what I believe?' Nallia said in hushed tones.

'It is,' replied Yostor. 'More perfect than I remember.'

'Unasked for, it has come: a God of Light.'

'We are called . . .'

'A God? Please — what are you talking about?' Victoria 280

asked anxiously. They ignored her, standing up and stepping forward, stretching out their arms towards the hovering globe of light, their damaged wings unfolding as though they meant to fly towards it.

'No, wait,' said Victoria. 'Your wings - they're not better yet!' She

pulled desperately at the Menoptera's arms before they stepped off the summit of the rocky outcrop. The glowing orb drifted away towards the Animus and the spell it had cast seemed to weaken. They fell to their knees, shaking their heads uncertainly.

'I would have tried to fly to it if I could . . . does it ignore us?' Nallia moaned.

'It has come for another purpose. Look!'

The orb was circling the Animus, and in turn the great grey body had risen clear of the ground, its many tendrils writhing. Higher the two spiralled almost in a parody of some stately dance, the air between them beginning to shiver and tremble as though seen through a heat haze. The orb sparkled more brilliantly, the Animus began to glow from within. An intense blue-white beam lashed out from the orb and splashed against the invisible shield around the Animus. A thunderclap of sound reached them long seconds later, telling of the miles separating them from the titanic conflict. The beam bit and tore at the shield, edging closer to the body of the Animus itself, causing the bloated mass to shiver and pulse more rapidly from within. Slowly the Animus began to sink downwards.

'It's winning!' Victoria gasped.

Then the beam faltered and died, and the scintillations about the surface of the orb dimmed perceptibly.

The Animus lifted again, its tentacles extending towards the orb, which suddenly rippled, losing its symmetry. It began to elongate as a portion of its substance was drawn out by an invisible force. Victoria thought of the Menoptera ship pulled from the air over the crater island and knew what the Animus was attempting. The stretched orb was rippling and swirling to escape the gravity beam, but it was being drawn inexorably towards the grasping tentacles.

Suddenly there was a flash of light and a cloud of glowing gas erupted from the orb's extended filament, sending the Animus tumbling backwards across the sky.

They saw the head of the orb stream away like a comet in the opposite direction. Then the sound and shock-wave reached them, almost blasting them off the outcrop. Hands still covering her ears, Victoria saw the remains of the orb, pallid and billowing limply like a deflating

balloon, fall back beyond the hills. There was a distant flicker and then its radiance vanished from the sky of Vortis.

The last echoes of the explosion died away.

Nallia was curled up in a trembling ball, while Yostor was staring at the place where the orb had disappeared.

'No,' he grated, then louder: 'No! You cannot desert us!

We are your children! We trusted you! We believed -' He stumbled to his feet and launched himself from the summit towards the far hills. But his twisted wings could not support him. He fluttered pitifully a hundred yards before falling to earth, struck the ashy debris in a cloud of dust and lay crumpled and still.

Fearfully, Victoria clambered down the shelving sides of the outcrop and ran towards him, the desiccated vegetation cracking and powdering under her feet.

She heard Nallia's shrill cry of fear.

A shadow blotted out the stars and darkness washed across the plain.

She felt an invisible weight descend on her shoulders, driving her to stumble and fall flat. A throbbing pulse reverberated through the ground itself. The Animus passed overhead while she cowered in the dirt, almost crushed by its repulsion field, looking up at the acres of web and writhing tendrils that could pinch out her life as easily as she could that of a gnat.

And she knew she was looking up at the master of Vortis.

Then the stars returned and it was gone, a misshapen cloud in the distance heading over the hills, and somehow she was still alive. She crawled to Yostor's side. He seemed unaware of her presence. He was sobbing over and oven

'The Gods have failed us. . . the Gods have failed us!'

Thirty

he three students were shocked by the appearance of Ttheir tutor as Oryl emerged from the lower end of the service shaft back into the control sphere. No longer a symmetrical, tightly controlled adult

entity, but a shrunken unstable cloud, flickering with half its former energy. A pattern of speechlight glittered feebly across Oryl's surface and obediently they fell in behind and all four slipped through the displacement interface.

As they traversed the hyperspace tunnel beyond, Oryl said faintly, (Command/instruction/urgent): 'After traversal, seal interface. The Old One must not follow us.'

Baffled and dismayed, they watched the plasma beings depart, then silently turned back to the monitor screens. The Animus was hovering over the steaming volcanic cone that concealed the shaft to the interior down which its adversary had fled. For a moment it seemed its vast bulk would prevent it following. Then it writhed and elongated, extruding a great grey tongue of protoplasm, and began to pour itself down the shaft, driving into the depths. It could not match the plasma being's speed but by ordinary standards it was fast enough.

The Doctor glanced at the sensors and made a quick calculation.

'At that rate of descent it will reach us in about, um . . .

ten minutes.'

They all looked at each other, then at the Doctor, who adopted a pained expression, as though unfairly put upon.

'Well I didn't know the plasma being wasn't powerful 283

enough to defeat the Animus,' he complained petulantly. 'It seemed so sure of itself.'

'Perhaps this simply is... the end,' said Draga, shoulders slumping.

'Well I'll not go down without a fight!' declared Jamie, drawing his knife and testing its razor edge.

The Doctor looked at him intently, a curious expression spreading across his puckish features.

'Fight. . . Yes, maybe we can still fight,' he said, as though half talking to himself 'Of course, it's just a matter of application of power in the right way. There's energy here to run a world. It has to be enough!'

He plunged forward and began stabbing at the controls, moving about the interior of the sphere crabwise, explaining as he went.

'I'm going to channel as much power as possible to the image projectors and also adjust the operating frequency of the system so that it oscillates rapidly. That should bypass the Animus's defensive shields. We can then use our magnified images as weapons in their own right, bracing them by force beams to the entire central core structure.

Your guns won't function of course, but you can use them as clubs and Jamie can use his knife, or even bare hands. I'll limit the tactile feedback so that you can judge the force you are applying without being hurt by anything the Animus does.' He looked up at their bewildered faces. 'Is that clear?'

'We fight that thing . . . hand to hand?' Draga asked doubtfully.

'Well, hand to tentacle,' the Doctor allowed.

'Can we actually match its power?' Shallvar asked.

'Your projected images can . . . hopefully.'

'What of the original Animus?' Krestus asked.

'The tank can handle two image foci at the same time. If I project the images of Jamie and yourself to the surface in the way the plasma beings obviously did in the past, you can handle the original, while Draga and Shallvar can remain here to deal with our imminent visitor. The Father can assist me or either group as necessary.'

Modeenus's eyes were shining.

'A holy war! We shall use the outsider's tools to smite the evil one and cast him asunder! Perhaps that is our purpose in coming here.'

The Doctor half smiled, still rapidly adjusting the controls.

'I certainly hope so.'

A band of light suddenly divided the tank in two. Half still displayed the image of the control sphere, while the other now showed a section of rugged mountainside.

'This is the area around the shaft entrance. You'll have to walk your images to the sea from there. Your surroundings will change appropriately as you go.'

Jamie and Krestus crossed the divide, the rest of the tank becoming hazy as they stepped into the miniature landscape.

It was remarkably convincing and for the first time Jamie knew what it was like to be a true giant. There were thin clouds passing at waist height and he could actually feel uneven ground under his feet.

'Doctor, we aren't going to crush anything by stepping on it?'

'Oh no, it's purely a tactile illusion. Your image doesn't weigh anything or need traction to move: its leverage is gained from the projectors mounted down here.' Jamie saw him glance at the secondary screen showing the Animus's progress. 'Everybody take their places please — we haven't much time.'

Jamie and Krestus orientated themselves then began to walk across the illusory landscape towards the sea.

Shallvar and Draga stood ready by the service shaft opening.

'I'll keep the density of our projections low so we won't get in your way, and we'll also save some energy,' the Doctor said rapidly. 'Father, please go to that section on your left and press the green contacts in sequence top to bottom.'

Modeenus obeyed.

'That's the planetary drive shut off and more power to spare. Watch out - here it comes!'

Shallvar saw the first tendrils of the Animus writhe through the shaft mouth and into the control sphere. He saw a look of distaste flicker across Draga's face, but she grabbed a double handful of the grey pulsating mass anyway and tore it to shreds.

A terrible foghorn howl of agony and surprise reverberated about the control sphere, reaching even through the thick tank walls. It touched some primitive part of him and he felt a sudden fierce delight in his enemy's pain. At last he could strike back! He also tore into the creature, sending fragments flying about the sphere. Tentacles that would have been as thick as a man's body snapped like threads in his hands. Masses of spongy web disintegrated like wet paper. A glowing bulbous projector growth snaked out of the mass and flared at him. He hardly felt a tingle as he plucked it like a flower and ground it

between his palms.

Then the main body of the Animus was withdrawing frantically back up the shaft and Draga plunged after it like a swimmer. He followed. The shaft should have been too narrow for his projection but something the Doctor must have done made it possible to pass through, and they surged up into the machine space after it.

Fragments of web tumbled like confetti about the control sphere, swirling freely in the virtually weightless conditions.

Deprived of their parent body and without that spark of individual life that animated the grey creatures and the replicas, they were already turning brittle and flaking away into dust.

Except for one snake-like fragment.

It twisted and writhed until it struck the great curving control board close to the access shaft. It adhered to the glowing surface for a moment, extending exploratory filaments, feeling about itself. One discovered the narrow gap in the junction between two panel units. The rest of the fragment slithered across to the crack, flowed through it like heavy oil and was gone.

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Victoria, Nallia and Yostor were sitting in an exhausted huddle in the lee of the rocky outcrop. Victoria had an arm about both Menoptera trying to give some comfort, though she could find no suitable words for such a desperate occasion. What do you say to people who have seen their God abandon them? What the orb had actually been was irrelevant; their shock and anguish was very real.

It was as she stared out bleakly across the desolation left by the Animus that she became aware of the two figures. A man and a Menoptera were striding across the plain from behind her and heading purposefully towards the sea. They were as translucent as the morning mist, as silent as ghosts and as tall as mountains.

They were also the exact likenesses of Jamie and Krestus.

After what she had suffered in the last few hours it was one shock too many.

Her scream died in her throat, her eyes rolled up and she fainted.

Jamie stood on the image of the brink of the highland escarpment and stared out to sea. A grey form swelled like an island, tentacles radiating in all directions like grotesque strings of floating logs.

'Looks like this one is just sitting there spreading itself around. Not as keen to travel as its other half, or maybe it hasn't learnt the knack yet.'

'Already it must be using the isocryte internally to support its great bulk and flight is but a step from that. There is no time to lose,' said Krestus, spreading his wings and soaring into the air.

Jamie jumped down the escarpment — on his scale, a drop of a foot and a half — to the narrow beach and waded into the water in giant strides. It didn't cover his boots and there was hardly a ripple as his almost immaterial energy form slipped easily between the water molecules. He could hear only Krestus clearly as hardly any sound was transmitted from the outside world through his projected image, but he

did not require hearing for what he had to do.

Tentacles whipped about his ankles, trying to pull him down. Contemptuously, feeling like a titan charged with power, he picked them up and hauled, jerking a two- or three-mile length out of the water in an eruption of spray and foam. Something snapped and the things came lose in his hands. He tossed them aside like old ropes, drew his knife and headed for the main bulk of the Animus's body.

More tentacles began to lash out as he got nearer, and he hacked and stabbed back at them, scattering twisting severed ends across the waters. Overhead, glowing palps tried to pull Krestus from the air with their invisible gravity beams, but he easily resisted them, swooping low and tearing them out in handfuls. The waters foamed and boiled with the thrashing of great limbs, but steadily, relentlessly, they continued with their task, to which there could be but one end.

Shallvar and Draga tore at the second Animus as it entwined itself about the great buttresses and pillars of the machine space. It lashed at them with all its strength but the blows rebounded from their force-driven projections. Knowing it had met its nemesis, the thing tried to escape upwards to the mouth of the surface shaft high above, but they would not let it go, locking their arms around the support braces and hauling it down again. Columns bearing the weight of a world groaned under the strain, but they held. Like wild things Draga and

Shallvar continued ripping out great hanks of tendril and matted web as though they were sods of earth and casting them aside to tumble away into the gloom. The air began to mist with the grey dust of death.

Suddenly a green-black oil stain coloured the water, and Jamie sensed they had struck some vital organ. He felt the pulpy mass around him shiver and heard the ghost of a moaning wail that must have been earsplitting in the outside world.

* * *

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Globules of body fluid trembled in the low gravity, glistening in the light from the magma storage globe and taking a long time to fall and burst. Some splashed onto the globe itself and boiled hellishly.

Amid the carnage two shimmering, pulsating, egg-shaped organs were exposed and the warriors realized they had reached the core. Heart, brain or both, they could not tell -

nor at that moment did they care. All they knew was that it was vital to something totally evil and malign, which did not belong in their universe. And so, at almost the same moment, four pairs of hands belonging to three different species crushed the life from the things and the spawn of the Animus died.

The external projections faded away. The feedback from the giant energy forms was gone. Jamie and Krestus, Draga and Shallvar were suddenly back in the tank, blinking at the transition, rising from the postures that they had held a moment before. Gradually the feral anger diminished and laboured breathing slowed. Every trace of the gore that had covered their immaterial projections had also disappeared; but, looking into each other's eyes, they knew the memory of the deed would never fade. It was a unique moment of unity of thought and purpose that they would always share.

The Doctor was in a corner that still displayed a section of the control sphere, bending over a screen. Around him hung the softly glowing forms of half a dozen adult plasma beings. He looked up and smiled at them.

'I have explained,' he said mildly, 'that we managed to sort things out ourselves but we appreciate their offer of help, even if it was a little late in coming.'

Half an hour later the last of the plasma beings vanished through the hyperspacial tunnel. The Doctor turned to Krestus.

'Vortis will be left in peace to find its own destiny. They will continue to supply energy through the hyperspace 289

conduit for as long as you require, but there will be no more students, authorized or otherwise. From this control room you can take Vortis where you will - back out into interstellar space, or into orbit around the Rhumon sun. It is your choice.'

'It is a heavy burden,' said Krestus, as they stepped out of the imaging tank.

'I have every confidence that the Menoptera people will make the right decision,' the Doctor stated simply.

'My advice, for what it's worth,' said Shallvar slowly, 'is to take yourselves away from this system as soon as you can.'

At his side Draga nodded gravely.

'We cannot find peace with our own kind,' she agreed. 'I have little hope the situation will improve if you remain.'

'Now then,' the Doctor chided them, 'you must never give up on peace. Perhaps I might mediate between you.'

'It is a generous offer,' Shallvar said, looking about them.

'Where's Modeenus got to?' He saw the priest still in the tank bending over the image of the control console. 'Father, what are you —'

The floor bowed upward under their feet, sending them tumbling and bouncing away in the fractional gravity, then split open. The translucent projection of the tip of Modeenus's forefinger tore through the gash and struck the tank's side hatch, slamming it closed. Even as they clung dazed to the stalks of light guides, the projection withdrew, leaving the hatch jammed shut behind a warped and jagged section of foot-thick control console panelling.

They clawed their way back to the side of the image tank.

'Modeenus!' Shallvar shouted, banging futilely on the transparent wall. The priest, who was still bending over the image of the control panels, straightened up. There was an unnaturally peaceful, almost benign

expression on his face, tinged only perhaps with a trace of sadness.

'My quest for truth is over. I know my purpose at last.'

The Doctor waved an angry and bewildered Shallvar into 290

silence and said gently, 'I'm very interested in the truth.

Would you mind telling me what you've discovered?'

'Gladly - it is very simple.' Modeenus moved over to the drive control panel and began touching the contacts. A deep hum began to reverberate through the control sphere.

'Despite our victory we are unworthy, unclean. Both we and this world have been corrupted by evil, by alien influence, by false Gods, and must pay the price. It will be a penance, a gesture to all the system: a purification!'

Jamie felt a knot begin to twist in his stomach.

'And just what form will this purification take?' the Doctor asked, his tone still calm but his eyes steely.

'As a final offering and atonement to Omnimon, I shall drive this planet into the sun!'

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Thirty-One

One by one the moons of Vortis spun out of their orbits and fell away behind the hurtling world as it gathered velocity. Soon the legacy of the first Animus was no more than a string of dwindling star-like points of light.

Meanwhile Vortis itself trembled from pole to pole.

Mountains shifted and bled away in landslides. Fissures opened and valleys were riven. Volcanic vents erupted violently or else collapsed in upon themselves. Venerable flower forest giants that had escaped the Animus were finally toppled. The air clouded and reddened with a planetwide pall of dust. And the battered and dazed survivors could only cling to each other in fear and incomprehension

— helpless in the grip of titanic, unknown forces.

Overhead, the star that was the Rhumon sun began very gradually to brighten.

'Yon man's quite mad!' Jamie said, gesturing at Modeenus's distant figure in the imaging tank.

They were all in a huddle among the tangle of light guides, clinging tight as the drive fields shifted out of phase and sent a fresh shockwave through the core of the world.

Draga agreed with Jamie's sentiments but wished he could think of something more constructive to say.

'He cannot expunge his guilt at being used by the Animus like that,' the Doctor explained. 'So he's sharing it with as many others as he can to spread the blame.'

A more violent tremor shook them.

'Time enough for psychoanalysis later,' Draga snapped angrily. 'If we don't regain control soon the unbalanced 292

drive stress will tear the planet apart long before we hit the sun!'

'But we can't reach him,' Shallvar retorted. 'He can use his projected image to crush us if we try to cut through the tank walls or cut the links to the external contacts again. He can see them all from inside there.'

'I realize the main conduits from the hyperspace tunnel are beyond our capabilities to alter, but can we not sever the linkages from them?' Krestus suggested.

The Doctor pointed up above their heads.

'The switching system must be buried deep within the secondary shell. It might take us days to find it, and I don't think Vortis can survive that long.'

'Doctor, what about working our way along until we get to those engine control things?' Jamie suggested. 'Can we not take charge of them from below like we did here?'

'It's four or five miles on our scale. Modeenus is bound to suspect what we're up to if we disappear. He could use his image to make so many holes in the intervening panels that we couldn't get through. We can't

risk damaging any other systems but it hardly matters to him.'

'Well maybe the TARDIS -'

'Even if he let us climb the shaft again, with all this interference from the activated isocryte I couldn't steer it accurately enough to do any good. I'm sorry, Jamie, but for the moment I truly do not know what to do.'

The vibration grew worse again.

'If only he'd slow down at least we'd have a little more time to work something out,' Draga said miserably.

'He may realize that. And of course he's also in a hurry to get absolution,' said the Doctor simply.

The screens in the tank continued to relay images from the surface. Earthquakes were gradually shaking the whole planet apart. In the hopeless silence Draga suddenly realized Shallvar was staring over her shoulder.

'Don't move,' he hissed, slowly drawing his gun. 'There is a fragment of web behind you - and it's not dead!'

Draga froze in horror. She saw the Doctor also looking over her shoulder, his expression changing rapidly from alarm to curiosity, then understanding.

'Don't shoot!' he commanded. 'Move forward slowly. I don't think it means any harm.'

Draga took a gliding step clear, then twisted round.

Like a fat shaggy snake, a ten-foot length of web hung twined around the light guide stems. Its lumpish head wove from side to side but it made no other move. No, not quite.

The web was flowing across the head, shaping and moulding into distinct features. Rhumon features. Features she recognized. Sickened she choked out, 'Doctor, that's -'

'I know.'

He pointed questioningly to the tank and its lone occupant. The

webhead, its features already melting away, nodded.

'It will all end here, you understand?'

The head nodded again. The Doctor looked at the others: infinitely sad but resolute.

'I think that this may be the answer to our problem. A terrible solution, but there is no time to find an alternative. I suggest we all go to the tank and attract Modeenus's attention - but stay clear of that rather poorly fitting hatch door.'

And he turned and bounded lightly away, and with many a backward glance the others followed. They surrounded the tank on three sides and began to bang on its walls.

Modeenus stared back out at them with an expression of pity on his face.

'Father Modeenus, you must listen to reason!'

'Hey, I'm talking to you!'

'Don't be a fool!'

Unseen, the web slithered across the open floor like a shadow, curled around the twisted panelling and up to the rim of the hatch. The crack was narrow but it was enough.

Modeenus did not see the web until it was already flowing across the floor of the tank towards him. He leapt backwards with a shout of frustrated rage, but it was too late. A stinging, cloying blanket of grey enveloped him.

Even as Draga heard Modeenus's muffled scream ring out, the Doctor was bounding towards the light guides shouting instructions.

'Use your guns! Cut that strand over there, and that one there ... no, that one. Krestus, get a torch. Jamie, help pull the ends together. One chance while they're distracted!'

The only thing left in the tank by now was a shapeless grey mass, twisting and squirming. For a moment Draga thought she saw a face in the writhing mess. Not Modeenus but the face of the person the web fragment had once been -

the person whose hatred and obsession had sustained her individuality beyond the dissolution of her body and even that of her destroyer.

The face of Nevon-two.

Then they had the strand ends side by side. The Doctor shone the torch down them then rammed the ends together.

A blaze of searing radiance lit up the tank and they twisted away to save their eyes.

When it died away again there was no sign of any living thing within the tank - just a thin drift of sooty dust.

'Use your weapons on full power!' the Doctor ordered.

'Cut away that projecting bit of panel so the hatch can open!

That's it . . . Just enough so I can get inside . . .'

Under the intense beams the twisted piece of panel burnt through and fell away. They grasped the rim of the hatch and pulled. It opened a foot, releasing a wave of scorching air. The Doctor took a deep breath and squeezed himself between the hatch and the frame and tumbled into the tank.

Instantly his magnified image appeared in the inner sphere.

He stabbed frantically down at a row of buttons on the control board.

The juddering drone of the planetary drive ceased. The screens relaying pictures from the surface steadied as ground tremors died away. Vibrations began to damp down.

The booming echoes and groans of the over-stressed worldcore structure reverberated through the vast space for long minutes, then gradually faded away.

The Doctor slowly ran a finger through the film of soot on the floor of the tank, sighed, then looked into their faces.

'Emergency high-temperature flash sterilization,' he explained regretfully. 'I couldn't risk anything in there remaining in control. What was left of Nevon knew that. As for Modeenus. . . well, perhaps that was merciful too.'

'Is it really all over now?' Jamie asked cautiously.

'Well we must still hope the homing beacon works properly to guide us back to the surface; but otherwise yes: it is the end. Obsession and madness have finally cancelled each other out. And their certainties have died with them.'

Thirty-Two

It seemed that half the population of Vortis had gathered round the TARDIS to see them off. Gifts were given and speeches made. Victoria nudged Jamie and nodded meaningfully at Draga and Shallvar, who were standing side by side and perhaps slightly closer than their official responsibilities required. He caught her implication, raised an eyebrow and smiled back. She looked out at the crowd. Rhumon and Menoptera together, with Menoptera children at the front fluttering their iridescent wings in excitement. She saw the familiar faces of Krestus, Nallia, Valio and Yostor, and thought of the faces that were not there but should have been: Annolos and Torth, Morg and Zenor, Relgo, Coroth . . . Well, she would just have to remember this moment for them.

Finally the Doctor, looking slightly embarrassed by the many praises, spoke.

'I don't like long goodbyes. I prefer to slip away quietly without any fuss. But perhaps this occasion is special, and there are a few things I really would like to say.

'By sharing hardship, tragedy and triumph, Rhumon and Menoptera have learnt a measure of respect and tolerance for each other, when a short while ago you were enemies.

But must you only respect strength and force of arms? How much better if respect had been accorded from the start without the stronger imposing its will upon the weaker.

Now the Menoptera have a powerful defence in the image system, they cannot be dominated again, of course, but the Rhumon must not in their turn look upon this as a threat.

Perhaps Vortis can be neutral ground where the divided Rhumon race can talk

a lasting peace. I hope you remember this when the ships from the Imperium and the Republic come, as they will very soon, and try to enforce the old divisions once more.

'You have gained greedy, but you have all also lost something, out here on the edge of your system.

'The Menoptera have lost their Gods. No matter that their nature has proved false, the belief was genuine, and it gave purpose and shape to their lives. They must now learn to live with more prosaic origins. Do not be ashamed of them.

Every race in the universe, however mighty now, had modest beginnings if you look back far enough.

'The Rhumon, I suspect, have lost confidence in the absolute certainties their respective systems provided.

Neither has stood up well in isolation, and some apparent truths dividing you have turned out to be quite false; perhaps innocently held, but possibly expediently maintained. That is something you must decide to investigate for yourselves. However it was, under pressure those artificial differences were stripped away, and you were left with those elemental characteristics inherent to all beings in some measure: courage, tenacity, compassion. Those are the qualities you should guard jealously, for you will need them all in years to come.

'Soon, cosmically speaking, you will be exploring the nearest stars, but already you have had a close encounter with two alien races, beside which the differences between Rhumon and Menoptera are quite trivial. One was malign, the other tolerant, both incredibly powerful. With a measure of luck you have survived the encounter, but you must heed its lessons, for it may be but a foretaste of what the future holds.

'It is time to leave the ways of cosmic childhood behind you, and with it all those beliefs and superstitions that have proven wanting. When you do set out on that long voyage, you must do so in unity and harmony; either for mutual protection, or in preparation for judgement by races more powerful than you can yet imagine. Go

forward bravely with open hearts and minds, but also humbly. Do not

try to force your preconceptions onto others, for you still have much to learn.

'Maybe I shall visit your descendants in another few hundred years. I trust they will talk of your deeds proudly.

'But for now, goodbye.'

The last hands were clasped and the last goodbyes spoken. They waved and there was an answering flurry of hands, both copper-skinned and black. The Doctor slipped into the TARDIS and Jamie followed him. Victoria paused on the threshold to take one final look at the starry sky of Vortis, and suddenly realized that she too was leaving something of her childhood on this strange world. Would that fledgling courage to choose her own destiny serve in its place? There was only one way to find out.

The door of the space-time ship closed behind her and the rising pulse of dematerialization filled the air.

Then the TARDIS was gone, leaving Vortis to fall on towards the star that grew ever brighter in its skies. Falling out of the twilight into a new dawn.

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